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死亡フラグが留まるところを
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泉 Aちき
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Volume 1 (WN)

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ゼン
ストークス家の使用人。
ハロルドを慕い、
その奇行に協力する。
ユノ
エリカの従者。
間者として
ストークス家に
潜入する。
タスク・スメラギ
スメラギ家の当主。
エリカ、イツキの父。
ノーマン
ストークス家の執事。
ゲームでは
「ストークスの爺」
と呼ばれた良識人。
一番の連れ込み。
ハロルドの見張を兼ね、
協力者となる。
エリカ・スメラギ
ハロルドの婚約者。
奥ゆかしい大和撫子。
8年後、原作主人公、
ライナーの仲間になる。
クララ・アメレール
ストークス家の元使用人。
ハロルドに婚姻をした暁で
殺されそうになったところを、
ハロルド《一番》に救われる。
ハロルド・ストークス
（平沢一番）
日本の大学生が憑依した、
ゲーム「Brave Hearts」の悪役キャラ。
傍若不遜な言動で、作中最指の嫌われ者。
頑健性が高く、剣の腕も一流。
8年後に死にする運命が待ち受けている。
イツキ・スメラギ
妹のエリカを溺愛する
スメラギ家の息子。
大人顔負けの
剣の実力を持つ。
コレット・アメレール
クララの娘。
ゲーム4作メインヒロインで、
プロローグ1作で
原作主人公ライナーと出会い、
幼馴染として育つ。

ハロルドをキッと睨みつけ、
エリカは人生で初めて
罵倒の言葉を口にした。
「貴方は最低の人間です！」

Chapter 1

(Gashan)
A high-pitched noise reverberated indoors.
The noise, which would make one close their ears with both their hands reflexively, was produced by a man, who seemed to be in his mid 30's, growing a Kaiser beard, holding a staff which shined with a black lustre, and donning a high-collared military uniform. He had smashed a huge vase, which was about 1 meter tall, with the staff grasped in his right hand.
White petals fluttered down, as the leaking water spread onto a deep crimson carpet.

「How will you take responsibility for this!?」

「I am extremely sorry! Please forgive me……!」

「Don't screw around, you inferior woman!」

The man's face was dyed with anger. The phrase, demonic expression, indicated his facial features perfectly in the current situation.
Like a raging fire, in his anger, which was as though it couldn't be satisfied by merely smashing a vase, he was using foul language to abuse the servant in front of him, who was on her knees, bowing her head down and offering words of apology while crying.

There was also the appearance of a young woman, wearing a resplendent dress, hugging a young boy and looking at the servant with scorn in her eyes, next to the man. At a glance, it seemed as though the man in the military uniform and the woman in the dress were verbally assaulting a lone servant.
Comprehending the current state of affairs, Hirasawa Kazuki came to the following conclusion.

(……Maybe, this is a game event?)

It might seem like a flustered and crazy conclusion, but there was a reason this conclusion was reached – Kazuki recognized this figure and this scene.

Presently, the sequence of arguments unfolding in front of him bore a resemblance to a scene in the single-player RPG – 『Brave Hearts』, which was up for sale a few years ago.

He was able to recall it instantly because he was a fan of the game, and no other reason. Even the fingers on both hands weren't enough to count the number of times he had completely played the game.
There was no mistake, since the dialog of the characters in each event scene was more-or-less memorized.

The man in the military uniform and the woman in the dress were the parents of a character appearing in the game, and the servant begging for forgiveness while crying was the mother of the main character of the game.

Grasping the circumstances up until there, Kazuki, who was being hugged by the woman in the dress from some time, falls into a state of extreme confusion and comes to a standstill.
Why are the characters of a game moving; in the first place, is this reality; is something happening to my body.

His thoughts were racing with each emerging question.
Abruptly being dropped into this scene of fighting, to which his comprehension couldn't catch up, a single thing was clear.

(I'll be troubled if I'm thrown into such a depressing event all of a sudden though!?)

For argument's sake, if the current scene were to trace the scenario of the game, then the servant, Clara's, life was in an extremely precarious situation.
Based on Kazuki's thoughts, it could be guessed that this is an event where the servant is killed. Clara's life is taken by the hands of Harold, the son of the man in the military uniform.

(Where is Harold, the vital character? If I'm not mistaken, in this scene, his anxious mother is……eh, no way)

And then, Kazuki realizes a fact which comes as a huge blow – That his current position is the same as Harold's.

A certain uncomfortable feeling rose up like a link. It was a concern about the height of his field of view.
Even though he was firmly standing on both his legs, his field of view was considerably lower.

This event scene is shown as a reflection of the past in the story. His exact age was unknown, but at that occasion, Harold was a boy of about 10 years old.
Various factors displayed an unpleasant coincidence.

(Perhaps, I have become Harold……?)

That was a preposterous thought that hit him. It wasn't as though there was any proof. But the instant that possibility went across his head, severe chills ran down his spine.

(No no, what am I saying. This is a dream, if I think about it normally.)

As though to shake off an unpleasant premonition, he persuades himself. That is the most acceptable answer according to common sense.

No matter how desperately his reasoning claims that this is a dream, the warmth transmitted from being hugged, the angry voice striking his ears, carrying a sense of reality, screams at Kazuki's five senses. No matter how much he denies it, in no way could it be thought of as a dream.

(Well then, since I know that this isn't a dream, as expected, is this the game world? There's no way……but this feeling of reality, can only be thought of as……..but still, the world of the game…….if thought of like that, then isn't Clara-san going to die!?)

Being torn between the conflicting thoughts of his reasoning and instinct, Kazuki could only act like an idiot. He wanted to stop thinking, since his thoughts were repeatedly going around in circles.

As though it was cut off from his will, his body moved in contrast with his thoughts. Shaking off his mother's arm, his legs advance,

step-by-step.

「There is no merit in lending ears to you begging for your life. That corrupt blood, I will personally purge it.」

「Father, wait. Entrust the execution of this woman to me」

The man had taken the sword which was hung on the wall, ready to cut down the servant. From behind him, Harold spoke words of restraint.

Kazuki was familiar with those words as he had seen them on-screen.
He spoke the dialog which wasn't voiced out in the game originally, in the voice of Harold, which he had gotten used to. Intervening at that point wasn't entirely only his intention.

「To you? What do you plan to do?」

「Recently, I learned a new magic. Let her become a guinea pig for testing that. Instead of dirtying the room with the blood of an inferior species like this, isn't that a better use?」

He found out that the corners of his lips rose up. Contrary to Kazuki's feelings, a villainous smile floated up.
It goes even without saying, but Kazuki didn't even have the slightest bit of complacency to express the smile. On top of being placed in an incomprehensible situation, his body overturning his will and taking action on its own was an unendurable terror for him.

Kazuki hadn't piled up an abundance of life experience to think fast in such a situation. A person who can adapt to and deal with such a situation, surpasses what can be called as calm or skillful and can only be called as a freak.
Fortunately or unfortunately, Kazuki wasn't a freak.

But if viewed from another angle, this meant that the flow of this event was irreversible.

「Hohou, that might also be amusing. Until then, throw this woman in the dungeon!」

As soon as Military Uniform raises his voice, immediately a soldier arrives and drags Clara away by grabbing her hand. Kazuki could only see off her retreating figure off.

「Filthy mixed-blood. Even though she was hired after I took pity on her, when asked to do something, she can't do even a single thing properly.」

「After all, she is an inferior species. Harold wants to test his magic, so she might be useful.」

「Humph, that is also true.」

As though looking at an object which was filthy, their eyes had no intention of hiding their disgust. This married couple didn't even perceive the servant, Clara, as a human being.
Under normal circumstances, towards this, Kazuki would have expressed his discomfort.

However, since his outlook had contracted due to the chaos, the married couple's speech and conduct didn't reach his ears. Even if it had reached him, he wouldn't have properly perceived the contents.

He had fallen into a stupor for several minutes. Let alone his surroundings, since then, what kind of conversations he exchanged with whom, how he reached this location, not a single thing did he have a recollection of.
When he finally came to his senses, Kazuki was in a room, of which he had no memories, resting deeply on a single person sofa, with his gaze wandering about in empty space.

「……Where is this? Is this Harold's room?」

While muttering with a powerless voice, without an aim, he looked around inside the room with swimming eyes.
Since it doesn't appear during the course of the game, its accurate parts aren't known, but from the feeling he got from looking at the width of the room, the canopied bed, the sofa he was resting on, he could guess as to whom this room belonged to.

In a corner of the room, there was a full-length mirror whose height

was greater than a grown male's. Kazuki swallowed his saliva, with a sharp sound resounding from his throat.

Standing up after putting all his power into his trembling knees, he walked towards the full-length mirror with unsteady footsteps.
To confirm his hypothesis. While praying that his hypothesis was off.

As he gets closer step-by-step, his heartbeat increased violently and his breathing also became fast and shallow. And yet, Kazuki didn't stop his footsteps.
And finally, he stood in front of the full-length mirror. He slowly raised his face, from a position where his head was bent low where he could only see the tips of his foot.
Facing the full-length mirror, he opened his tightly shut eyelids. The person who was reflected from its surface, was without a doubt——

「It's a lie, right……. 」

Ruthlessly depicted, was the figure of Harold with the appearance of a young boy.

Chapter 2

Glossy black hair and red pupils. Even if he didn't want to, he could feel that Harold's face had the features found on people outside Japan and even far away from Asia.
Roughly 140 cm in height and as expected, aged approximately 10 years.

Dressed in a pure white shirt with a cross-tie and knee-high half-pants, he had the appearance which was exactly like a painting of a young boy coming from a distinguished and noble family.

Hirasawa Kazuki had become Harold Stokes. It seemed hard to accept, but with this, he had practically confirmed that this was the truth.

Neither the reasoning nor the process was understood. Well then, should this situation be gathered as possessing a person or should it be fine with viewing it as a frighteningly real dream. Or maybe, Hirasawa Kazuki had switched places with Harold Stokes, or it might also be that the consciousness of Hirasawa Kazuki had been birthed by the delusions of the owner of this body that had gone crazy.

The loss of a factor to verify one's self. Attacked by a feeling of as though loosing all the support from his feet, at the same time as he put his hands on his knees, which had lost almost all their strength, he held back the sense of nausea which was welling up.
His breathing was agonizing and his visibility was dyed white due to vertigo, while his gastric juices rampaged around in the opposite direction.
In any case, it was an awful feeling.

Shall I throw away everything as it is and just sleep – With such irresponsible feelings, Kazuki collapsed onto the bed. He didn't have any willpower left to work out his thoughts.
Waking up after sleeping and telling 「It was all a dream, I was seriously flustered」- muttering that, he wipes off his cold sweat.
Clinging onto that hope, as his consciousness was drifting off, it was pulled back into his body due to the knocking sounds on the door.

「……Come in」

The thought of feigning ignorance passed through his mind.
But before he could think deeply about it, he gave out a reply.
It wasn't clear whether it was Harold's will or Kazuki's subconsciousness.

(Ah, but I wouldn't abruptly tell them to 「Come in」)

Without even knowing who it was, talking in such a rude manner, Kazuki wasn't a person who didn't know about courtesy. If that is the case, like before, did his body move on its own?
Since he had already replied, without a choice, he raised his languid body up while thinking such thoughts, which put him in an even more depressing mood.

While that may be true, it wasn't as though the visitor would refrain from entering into the room. A man with greying hair opened the door, bowed respectfully and stepped inside the room.
Looking at his face, Kazuki realized who the other person was.

Norman.
He, who serves as a butler in this estate, given the nickname-『Conscience of the Stokes house』 by the players, is a character affectionately called as 「Norman-san」. Since he was just a butler and not a blood-relative, he wasn't a member of the Stokes family.

Anyway, he, who becomes a refreshing agent to the heart in the event related to the highly ranked and valued Stokes house, stepped into Kazuki's (Harold's) room.

「Excuse my rudeness」

「What business do you have?」

「To be honest, I want to consult Harold-sama about……」

Norman's words trailed off at the middle of his sentence.
Feeling suspicious, Kazuki intently watched Norman's face. When he did that, the words which followed, bewildered him.

「Perhaps, are you feeling unwell? Then……」

「There's no problem」

「But your complexion is――」

「I'm telling you that there's no problem」

Without even an ounce of consideration, he cut off Norman's words filled with concern and discarded them.
Honestly, there were all kinds of problems, but it wasn't as though he could straightforwardly convey – 「Actually, it seems like I have possessed Harold-kun」. And so, when he mildly wanted to refuse, it became like this. It seemed as though this mouth automatically translated words into Harold's style. Was the previous 「Come in」 also the work of this mouth. If that was the case, what an annoying feature this was.

In response to Harold's blunt reaction, Norman felt that something was out of place.
The young Harold that he was aware of had extreme hatred towards holding back, and would never work hard, would run away from pain, and would eliminate everything he disliked.

His parents were also largely responsible for generally approving something like that, that is to say, if Harold was feeling unwell, instead of enduring it like this, he would have exaggeratedly cried out about his condition.
However, only on this day alone, did he not do this, urging to continue the conversation, even though his face was extremely pallid.

He thought about speaking at a later time, but looking at Harold's eyes which were screaming – 「Hurry up and speak」, Norman continued the conversation.

「…….Then, I'll be brief. I am requesting for reduction of the punishment imposed on Clara」

When he heard that, Kazuki remembered. The reality that the current him holds the life of a person.
The shock of realizing that he had become Harold was too big, due to which his memory had lapsed completely.

His mouth had spouted out the dialog of the event, where he makes the servant as the test subject for his new magic, on its own, and naturally, Kazuki had no intentions of doing that.
That being the case, as he was about to instantly consent to Norman's request, he wasn't even able to form them into words.

It wasn't as though Harold's will obstructed him. It was that Kazuki himself, swallowed down the words.
This was because he had to answer according to the situation, since he had knowledge about the original work.

If the situation followed the original work, then the servant, Clara, would be burned to death by Harold's magic. As a result, the woman's daughter, Colette, would be driven out of the Stokes' territory, since she would have no relatives.
Before long , Colette, who would have collapsed due to the exhaustion of both mind and body, would then be sheltered, and would start to live with the original work's protagonist and his family, under the same roof.

In short, Colette was the main heroine and if Clara was saved now, she wouldn't encounter the protagonist, which would be a huge deviation from the story. Kazuki realized this and was at a loss for words.

In the end, this was just a possibility.
There was a possibility that even if Clara was either saved or killed, Colette might encounter the protagonist and become his friend.
The phenomenon which could be called as the power to alter history.
If this power worked even if Kazuki moved as he pleased, then for better or for worse, there was no need for him to worry.

(If that is true, then the events of the original work can't be avoided and my future would be pitch black. Let me assume that a power like that doesn't exist)

If he hadn't done that, Kazuki's mental health would have taken a hit.
Conversely, if a thing like the altering power doesn't operate, using the knowledge about the original work, Kazuki could avoid the

messed up actions taken by Harold, and it wouldn't be extremely difficult to behave in a way that wouldn't lower his impression.
A ray of hope rose up in Kazuki's heart.

(For that purpose, if I take actions which deviate too much from the original work, I would lose an advantage, which would be a poor plan. Without changing the scenario in a broad sense, if I could guide only the conclusion to a decent direction, then……..!)

As it was, if he didn't take any actions and the scenario progressed completely in accordance with the original work, in a few more years, Kazuki would welcome death. He must do everything he can to avoid that.
However, what kind of influence the destruction of the original story causes, wasn't known. Much less, in an RPG world, where death was ever closer. In a world like this, knowing the rough flow of the future was the greatest advantage, and if this was ignored, death might come due to a development absent in the original work.

A colossal death flag called the world of survival of the fittest. To take on both those parties and survive, the flow of the original work must be drawn while it would be fine to move forward by breaking down his own flag.
Anyway, Kazuki strengthened his resolve to do all he could before he could start talking pretentiously, if he didn't want to die.
Norman was startled by seeing Kazuki's eyes, which were harboring such a stubborn determination. This was because, he had never seen the boy making such eyes previously.

「Clara is that servant, right? Bastard, are you telling me to act for the sake of rescuing her.」

Kazuki instantly regretted the opening of his mouth.
As for Kazuki, his intention was to tell – 「Clara-san was the servant from some time ago, right? I really want to save her but, I cannot move openly」. How freely was that translated for the remark to be like this.

Naturally, as though he was dispirited, Norman's expression became clouded.

(This is bad!)

Kazuki felt through his body that the flow had become extremely bad. The way things were going, his Hate Points was going to increase from the already existing amount.
Somehow trying to gloss over things, he frantically squeezed out words.

「If you want to help, to start with, move on your own. I will listen to your words after that」

「In, in that case……..!」

「Importunate. Get out immediately」

Kazuki, flustered by his own mouth spouting out abusive language more than what was expected, made Norman leave, by driving him out mid-sentence.
Seeing him leave while expressing gratitude even after such treatment, Kazuki was relieved that his will to somewhat co-operate was conveyed.

Throwing himself down on the bed, looking up this time, Kazuki started to reflect deeply on his careless thinking.
He cannot avoid taking back his previous opinion already. As long as this mouth was there, it seemed that it would be a considerably difficult problem to alter only the conclusion of the event without lowering his impression.

While that may be true, he couldn't just tell – 「As expected, shall I give up」. If the worst situation was to be assumed, the situation where death in this world would, without a doubt, be the death of Hirasawa Kazuki, which would be extremely troublesome. There might also be a possibility of returning back to his original world by dying here, but the risk was too high for him to put it into action.

And so, until the clue to escape the current situation was caught, the best way to survive as Harold Stokes was to act in accordance with the original work and avoid taking screwed up actions.
In that way, with a situation close to the original work's, if the flow of this world was continued to be observed closely, it would

become clear whether this place was the same world of 『Brave Hearts』 or a world which was a counterfeit of it.

And so, what was it that Kazuki ought to do now. It was to gather information, to get a good grasp on the present situation.

Kazuki, who had recovered his energy to a certain extent due to the discovery of hope, got off the bed and started rummaging through the drawers and searching the bookshelf. When he did that, other than general goods he also found some items which had appeared in the game.
Nearly everything stowed on the bookshelf were books related to magic or biographies which contained lots of illustrations.
Fortunately, the books were written in Japanese, which could be read even by Kazuki.
As expected, it might be a world of made □in □Japan.

After briefly finishing his search, he went out of the room. In order to talk with Clara.
He calls out to an armored soldier who was nearby.

「Oi, bastard」

「Ha Ha!」

The soldier bent down on one knee and lowered his head.
By the way, he stopped minding about the use of his language in each and every single situation.

「Lead me to the dungeon where the servant called Clara is imprisoned」

「To the dungeon?」

「What? If you have any objections, I'll listen to them」

「No, I don't! This way please!」

With brisk movements, the soldier took the lead. The armor was clattering noisily. It looked like it would be an annoyance if he wandered around in the mansion during night.

He followed behind the soldier like that for a short while.
They arrived in front of a desolate looking building with a height of 3m, made out of stone, situated behind the mansion.

「This is the dungeon」

「How many people are imprisoned?」

「For now, it should be a single person, but…….. 」

If it was like that, it seemed that the only one inside was Clara. For Kazuki, this was convenient.

「You remain here and keep a lookout so that no one comes inside」

「Ce, certainly」

Making the soldier stand outside, only Kazuki entered inside the building after opening the wooden door.

「Ha, Harold-sama!? Uo!」

In the narrow room, which had the appearance of a guardroom, there was the form of yet another soldier. Lying down upon the chair which was lined up, was the posture of the soldier indicating his blatant idling.

The soldier, hurriedly trying to rise up, tripped and fell down from the chair. Kazuki ignored that and extended his hand to an iron grill, furnished on the ground in the left-hand corner of the room, which appeared to lead to the dungeon. When he pulled it, he found that it was locked tightly.

「Hand over the key」

「Ye, yes!」

The soldier handed over a key to Harold, from the ones hung on the wall. He inserted the key into the keyhole and when he turned it to the left side, the lock opened with a loud clank.

「I have to talk with the person in the dungeon. Don't you dare enter」

Nailing down that point, he descended the stairway leading to the dungeon while he still held the key, so that he wouldn't get locked in, even if by chance.
The stairway was gloomy and even the steps couldn't be seen properly. He finally reached the prison after carefully descending the 10 odd steps.

The prison had a total of 4 cells, 2 on each side. Each cell only had something which seemed like a bed made only out of straw and a simple toilet out in the open. On the wall at the other side of the prison was a small window, with a height of 20 cm and a width of 30 cm, through which a small amount of light was illuminating the prison.

Kazuki stopped his feet in front of the cell situated at the interior right hand side, in which Clara was imprisoned.

「There is no mistake that you are Clara Emerel , right?」

「Harold-sama……?」

Kazuki stood in front of Clara's cell in a position where she could not make out his facial features.
It was at the level where she could only guess at who it was from looking at the small silhouette of the person and listening to the voice of the person.

However, a doubt rose up in her mind.
A doubt about why he came here.

「Perhaps…….Has that time already come?」

Her voice shook.
A test subject for experimenting a new magic. The boy standing in front of her had definitely told that some time ago.
Thinking that the time had already come, Clara's face was etched with an even more deeper color of despair.

But the reply from Harold was something which greatly deviated

from her prediction.

「If that is your wish, then I will do so. But currently, it's for a different matter.」

Harold folded his arms and leaned his back on the iron bars of the opposite cell.
She thought about what he meant by a different matter. She had already worked in this mansion for almost 2 years and the amount of times she had directly conversed with Harold was uncountable, but still, she tilted her head in confusion.

「A different matter, is it?」

「Just confirmation. You only need to answer my questions without any lies or deception」

「……..Okay, I will answer all the questions you ask me」

The vigor with which Clara could show agreement, was only by nodding. It was completely different from how he normally behaved, where he always wanted to have his own way. She was swallowed by the atmosphere given off by Harold, who was emitting a calm and composed aura and was unbecoming of his age.

「What is the composition of your family?」

「I have a single daughter」

「What is her name?」

「She is called Colette」

「What about blood relatives or close family members other than her?」

「I left my hometown with my husband, which was similar to running away, and from then on it was a state of isolation from my house. 3 years ago, due to a disease, my husband…….」

(So there was reason like that for Colette not having a relative other than her mother)

The purpose of the questioning was for comparing and adjusting the knowledge of the original work.
Clara was getting baffled by listening to him asking questions about her circumstances which had nothing to do with her punishment, but Kazuki paid no heed to that and persistently continued to interrogate her.

「The age of your daughter is?」

「She becomes 9 this year」

「Do you have any experience in martial arts or using any magic?」

「No, things like that in particular……..」

The time it took was a few minutes. Kazuki indifferently repeated the questions. The outcome was rather good.
All the information obtained from Clara was consistent with Kazuki's. With this, all the information that could be obtained at this stage was present and he was able to decide on what to do hereafter.

「That's it. Well then」

「Wait for a moment please」

Clara pleaded for Kazuki, who was about to leave, to halt.

「……..What?」

「If I die, then my daughter……Colette will be all alone. At that age, she wouldn't even be able to survive if she is left alone……..」

Clara tells that while shedding tears.

「Therefore, after my death, please take care of my daughter! That girl has done no wrong. Please, please I beg you…….!」

Instead of worrying about her own life, she, who was anxious about the future of her child, begged while grovelling and bowing her head, to the one whom she should hate to the core, who was similar to a person falsely accusing her.

If it was the real Harold, he might have ridiculed and laughed at that appearance.

But Kazuki was different. He could currently sense the unconditional love from a mother to a daughter, from Clara. Kazuki couldn't laugh at the mother who was begging for the happiness of her daughter, instead of worrying about her own life. He now held the conviction that she was an existence that was absolutely indispensable for Colette.
The likes of killing such a person was improbable.

「Unsightly. That appearance and also the utter stupidity of being seized by needless and meaningless anxiety」

For Harold, this seemed to be consoling words. Up to what extent does his haughty attitude go.

「That is, what do you mean by……..」

Without answering Clara's question, Kazuki starts to walk away. If he were to stay in front of her any more than this, it seemed as though he would start crying out of sympathy. Turning his back on her, Kazuki briefly told her –

「If you love her to that extent, never again let go of her」

Before long, the sound of footsteps also vanished and the sound of the iron grill at the entrance being closed resounded out inside the dungeon.
Clara absentmindedly gazed at the darkness, through which Harold had disappeared, digesting the words he had left behind.

「This despair is needless anxiety, is it……..? Can I once again embrace Colette with these arms……..?」

There was no one to answer the murmur which leaked out from Clara and those words were swallowed up by the silence.
She didn't know why, but she now felt as though the silence was tender.

Chapter 3

Even though he had obtained important information, he was far from finding a solution to the problematic situation. There was a need to form a concrete plan to save Clara and Colette.
For now, Kazuki thought out that the 2 of them needed to leave the Stokes territory and shift their residence to the Brosch village, where the Liner family of the original work's protagonist lived.

The probability of Colette and Liner coming across each other would be the highest when Clara is still alive. As long as one had played the original work, they would know that the Brosch village was in no way large, and from the remarks of Liner in the game, they would also know that all the village children knew each other. The problem was whether Colette and Liner would develop a close relationship as in the game.

As long as Clara was still alive, it would be difficult to produce a situation where Colette would live together with the Liner family. In that case, he was ruminating whether he could somehow or the other, place Colette in the childhood friends position.

Even though he was groaning 'Umumu….', no bright ideas came to mind. The one who appeared at such a time, where he was reaching his limits, was none other than Norman.

「Excuse me」

Kazuki, who saw Norman bowing down his head in the exact same manner he had done a few hours ago, thought – 'as expected, a well disciplined butler is different', and felt moved meaninglessly.
If there was something different form before, it was the bundle of sheets held in both his hands.

「Harold-sama, how are you feeling…….」

「How many times will you make me say it, there's no problem. And, what is that?」

「These are the map of the Stokes territory and its surroundings, and the information regarding the settlements in and around the

neighborhood of the territory」

(Norman-san, efficiently done!)

He held back that shout of delight, which would destroy his character. Well, even if he had told something, it would be translated into something ominous like 「Hou, a bit impetuous, aren't you」, which might not even seem like a compliment.

Nevertheless, it seemed as though, in just a few hours, Norman gathered up the huge amount of information. He decided to ignore asking him about what he did with the original work he was assigned.

「Well worked. Well then, how the hell do you plan to save that servant?」

「……..It is extremely difficult for me to say this but, I think that it would be ideal for her to migrate outside the territory of the Stokes house」

This was a huge wager for Norman.
Sending people out of the territory, this would reduce the manpower and also the revenue that could be collected from them. Harold was thinking that there was no need to mind it since, right from the start, he had no intention of killing her. Norman never thought that Harold was thinking like that.

He thought that Harold might feel unpleasant due to the manpower and revenue becoming the property of other nobles.
The thing called a noble's honor.

「Is that so. Where is the candidate town located?」

「Th, that is, here……. 」

However, looking at Harold responding as though nothing had happened, Norman, who was partly vigilant, was letdown.
Harold was looking through the document brought by Norman, while listening to him. That attitude was seriousness itself.

In fact, being enthusiastic about Norman's proposal, he promptly

started to think about a plan to deal with the point which appeared to be problematic.

「The things that need to be gathered to migrate outside the territory is numerous. In the first place, is it even possible to come and go out of the territory of the other nobles easily?」

「For individuals, there are no particular regulations. However, if we send her off without anything to an unknown land, the circumstances of her livelihood might be hard. I think that a minimum amount of materials are required…….」

If that was the case, there was a need to use a small, horse-drawn cart. Of course, a horse-drawn cart of the Stokes house.
And, for a cart belonging to a noble or a merchant to pass through, a transit permit was indispensable.

「With the goods, if the daughter is also added to that, the utilization of a cart cannot be avoided. Then, there is also a need to do something or the other regarding the transit permit…….really, there is nothing more problematic than this whole damn thing」

Contrary to his words, his eyes don't leave the document even for an instant.
And, Norman was surprised to see that Harold had a grasp on the matters concerning Clara and her family, as though it was obvious. He had thought that normally, Harold was indifferent like his parents.

(Perhaps……..No, it must be so. Harold-sama, even at his age, must be thinking about the people)

Therefore, didn't he ask the one who had proposed to save her to tackle the situation personally?
If thought about it like that, everything fell into place.

Also, wasn't the bragging about using her as a test subject for his new magic, to hide her, who was about get slain, in a safe place for the time being.

Without showing disapproval at losing the almost nonexistent profit from the manpower and revenue of a single person, wasn't he seriously trying to save her without putting on airs.

While thinking about the future, Clara running away to a land where the Stokes house's power doesn't reach would be the safest for her. That being the case, rejecting that suggestion would be idiotic.
From the start, Kazuki was moving to save her. It was natural that he wanted to give it his all when he was unexpectedly requested for assistance in that matter.

Passionate feelings welled up in Norman's heart. And simultaneously, he felt ashamed at himself for being suspicious towards Harold.
He shouldn't be doubting the young boy, who was groping around for a solution to save a single servant in such an earnest manner.
If the boy himself was so serious, then he must also be serious.
When he thought like that, his tone also naturally became passionate.

「In this town, in the following season, due to the harvest festival, they constantly require help……」

「Compared to the Stokes territory, the cost of living is high. If there is no environment where they gain a stable income…….」

Regarding his opinion, Harold precisely pointed out the problem, with the document as his basis. That thinking ability, outlook and knowledge weren't that of a 10 year old.
Inside the young boy's body was a university student, so it wasn't a mystery that he was able to do that, but Norman who didn't know that, couldn't help but think that he was a prodigy.

If he spoke about his feelings frankly, Norman didn't have even the slightest bit of agreeable sentiments concerning the Stokes house.
The current head of the family and his wife were the embodiment of the pure-blood principle and considered themselves to be the chosen ones. They looked down on anyone other than pure-blood nobles and didn't even think of the popualtion of their territory as people.

But he, who was the son of those 2 people, was different.
Without being seized by an easy-going prejudice, holding the moral values important as a human, he had a mindset comparable to adults.

This young boy, wasn't he the light of hope that would change the Stokes house. Harold was emitting a brilliance that wouldn't be there if he wasn't carrying such expectations.

「– That is all」

Eventually, the heated up discussion had ended after more than 2 hours had passed from the start of it. The sky, which could be seen from the window, was dyed in a red color.

From the exchange of his views with Norman, Kazuki also noticed some of the finer details, which he wasn't aware of.
With that, the migration of those 2 to the Brosh village was mostly decided upon.

They hesitated on deciding the day on which they would carry out the plan. As he had played the original work, he didn't feel that a large number of days had passed before Harold had killed Clara.
It seemed to be done on that very night at the shortest, 2 days later at the longest.

If there were no drastic delays, it wouldn't affect the flow of original work, but with respect to taking insurance, the plan had to be carried out within 3 days, including today. This was also to avoid a situation where his parents would doubt him if he were to be too impatient. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to implement the plan today, at this time. Then it would have to either be the next day or the day after.

「Norman」

「Ha」

「We will carry out the plan tomorrow night. I will do something about the transit permit. Until then you complete the preparations」

「Understood」

Even though he was worried, Kazuki chose to act the next day. Guessing from Harold's personality, he would kill Clara on the very same day, in other words, tonight. He judged that it would be the best if they made the situation stay close to the flow, as much as possible.

After Norman had left, in the room where there was only a single person, bathing in the western sunlight, he started simulating his actions and dialog for the time period starting from now until tomorrow night, a number of times.
He was taking part in a make-or-break match, where absolutely no mistakes would be permitted, since he was responsible for the life of a person.
With this, there was no way he wouldn't be nervous.

To shake off the nervousness, Kazuki single-mindedly repeated the simulation.
He was doing that the whole time, until it was time for dinner when his completely immersed consciousness was brought back to reality.

He would know whether it was effective.
When they began eating dinner, to deceive his farther, he was able to smoothly lie.

「Father, right, I have a request」

「What is it Harold?」

「Recently, it seems that a blacksmith has opened up a shop in Leitze, and it also seems that the swords sold there are amazing. I also wish to try swinging them」

「Fumu, in that case, shall we send a servant to randomly buy some swords from there」

「That will take some time. I want it now, as soon as possible」

「Harold really is gallant. In the future, he will become a splendid noble like you, dear」

His mother was laughing with a – Hoho Hoho.
Kazuki didn't know why he was gallant for just wanting a sword, but since it was no different than being a covering fire, he decided to take advantage of it.

「Mother is also telling that, hey isn't it fine? If there is a transit permit, we can send someone to buy them for my use」

「Doesn't Harold seem like he really wants it? Dear, won't it be fine to just write a few lines」

「Alright. Then, tomorrow morning, I will write the transmit permit」

「Thank you, father!」

If one only looked at the dining table filled with laughter, they would think that it was an intimate and happy family. But for the surrounding servants, it wasn't a thing that they could warmly watch over.

Everybody knew, that they only thought of the servants as rocks on the side of a road.
It would be the same even if they were there or not there. In the first place, they don't even notice them.
Even though it was the family of their employer, they couldn't find those kind of people likeable.

The bleak harmony, formed from talking with the current head and his wife, advanced with the night.
But nobody present here knew that this was a scene which was false.

Except for Kazuki and Norman.

Chapter 4

There were some vigorous movements the next day. Mainly by 2 soldiers.

These were the 2 soldiers who knew the actions Kazuki had taken the day before.
To impose a gag order on this time's plan to save Clara, thinking that it would be desirable to limit the number of people who were concerned with it, Kazuki had confirmed whether these 2 were people who could be trusted with confidential work, from Norman the day before.

Norman's answer was a yes. For Kazuki, it was fortunate but, it was hard to say for the soldiers.
Called by Harold early in the morning, when they headed to his room filled with trepidation thinking about exactly what they were called for, all of a sudden they were given an explanation about the plan to save the servant.

Without their understanding catching up to the situation, the one thing that was carved deeply into the hearts of the 2 soldiers and the coachman of the horse cart, who was called like them, was that, if this plan failed and was discovered by a third party, their lives would be in danger.

Therefore, one of the soldiers completed the orders given one after the other with a – hii hii.
The other one was running around the town at the same time.
The only one who was at ease was the coachman, who had no work until night.

「Ha, Harold-sama, I have bought all the goods and come back」

「Toss them into the dungeon while not being seen. After finishing that, ride the horse and confirm the route to the highway with your own eyes」

「But I still haven't brought the horse along…….」

「It'll be fine if you borrow a horse from the ones in the mansion

and go. However, give it an injury that arouses suspicion. Come back before it gets dark」

No mercy, precisely Spartan.
If explained why, since Kazuki himself was at his wit's end, he didn't have enough room to pay attention to his surroundings.

Confirming that the soldier had headed towards the stable, Kazuki resumed practising his magic.
The magic he was practising was the low grade magic 『Flame Column』, directly translated, it was – pillar of fire (Hibashira). The magic which was thought to be fired by Harold in the original work, to kill Clara.

They actually didn't know what it was, but among the players who had watched the movie scene, 「It's probably Flame Column」 was what they had widely perceived it as, and so he decided to conform to it.
Well, it was relatively inconsequential but, it couldn't be helped that it's power was weak.

At first, with embarrassment added to him thinking whether he could really use magic, he performed the chant. Surprisingly, when it succeeded in the first try, as expected, he was excited, but when he looked at it properly, it only rose up to a height of 40 cm and its thickness was also about as small as an aluminum can.

In the original work, it had a height and thickness which could easily envelop a grown woman, and in the combat scene, it looked as though it was a pillar of fire which had a height of 2 – 3 m.
If this body really was that of Harold Stokes, then it should also be possible for Kazuki to do it.

It wasn't as though he would burn Clara to death so, Kazuki also knew that it wasn't absolutely necessary for it to have so much firepower. Even for the actual performance, he had no intentions to activate the magic as extensively as shown in the movie scene.

That said, since he was letting Clara get away, there was no way he could show a corpse and so, he needed enough firepower to show that he had burnt her so much that not even cinders remained. For

that reason, from some time ago, Kazuki was practising magic while simultaneously, leaving burn marks on the ground and tree trunks and also burning leaves.
Even though it was an open location, he was still inside a forest with dense, overgrown trees. Carefully paying attention so as to not start a forest fire, he was repeating a truly boring operation.

「Fuu……..It should be enough to this degree」

There was no change in his arrogant tone even though he was speaking to himself. For Harold, it seemed as though this was how he spoke originally.
Leaving that aside, for the time being, he disguised the vicinity as though it was the aftermath of a fire. Later, for the act, to show this off, if he just made a pillar of fire, it would be thought that it wasn't a mystery that the corpse had been burnt off.

Honestly, he was a bit anxious. Or rather, he was full of anxiety. Since his decision would divide whether a person died or not, there was no way his mind could be calm.

After all, they are game characters – Even if he thought of it like that, after actually exchanging words with them and experiencing those emotions, they were already human beings as far as Kazuki was concerned. He couldn't possibly view them as just computer icons.
No matter how much preparations he had setup, 「With this, its absolutely fine」- he probably couldn't be convinced that that was the case.

On the contrary, currently for Kazuki, that was fortunate.
When he came to his senses, he was lost in a world which seemed to be inside a game, and he was currently personally experiencing the unprecedented situation of possessing a character's body.
Under such a situation, it wouldn't be easy to keep calm.

However, presently, Kazuki could see the life-threatening crisis approaching him, and since he was doing his all to avoid it, he didn't have the leeway to be concerned with other affairs. It was close to a kind of running away from reality, but it was an unshakeable fact that by doing so, he maintained mental stability.

With this, is it really fine; Do any defects exist in the plan that I have thought out; Is there anything more that I have to do – Kazuki, without stopping these thoughts, was immersed in making careful preparations until the sun set.

And then, the long awaited full-moon night came.
In the forest illuminated by moonlight, Clara arrived, lead by the soldier.

She wasn't wearing the maid outfit that servants normally wore, but casual clothes often seen in the town. During daytime, Kazuki had sent the soldier to buy them, and had ordered him to tell her to change into those clothes.

「Umm……..」

「Keep quiet」

He rudely interrupted Clara, who was uneasy. Even now, Kazuki was extremely nervous.
For a while, the strained silence continued. Kazuki, Norman, Clara and soldier A- the one who was slacking off yesterday-The thing that broke off the silence which had descended upon these people, was the sound of a horse's hooves impacting on the ground, from far away.

「…….Finally」

Deep from inside the forest, from the the direction of the town, the ones who appeared were the soldier, who was brushing aside plants, and a small girl, riding on 2 horses.
When they saw each other, Clara and the girl simultaneously raised their voices.

「Mama!」

「Colette!」

Clara strongly embraced the little girl, who was let down from the horse. With that in his peripheral vision, Kazuki received the report from the soldier.

「Sorry for being late, Harold-sama. It took some time to cross the forest while pulling the horse, so……」

「That is inconsequential. While bringing that girl, was your figure seen by the town-folk?」

「No problem. But, it seems as though a person going from the town to the mansion like her, has leaked out the circumstances, and rumors that Clara was already going to be killed are spreading out」

「Tsk」

He involuntarily clicked his tongue. Now that it was mentioned, it was obvious, but he didn't think that far ahead.
As expected, he still wasn't calm enough.

But for now, he didn't have the leisure to worry about it. He put off regretting and reflecting for a later time.
To the 2 people who were hugging each other with tears floating in their eyes, he talked to them in a compromising tone.

「I'll present 2 choices to you bastards」

In front of the faces of the 2 people who were looking up at Kazuki, he raised up his index finger.

「First, die here」

Towards Kazuki's words, Colette let out a voice as though she was convulsing. In contrast to that, Clara was staring straight-forwardly at Kazuki's eyes. In front of their eyes, he next raised up his second finger.

「Second, discard this land and start a new livelihood outside the Stokes territory」

「Eh?」

With this suggestion, as expected, even Clara opened her eyes wide. Outside the territory, in other words, if they migrated to another noble's territory, the Stokes house couldn't interfere with their lives.

That is, acquittal.

「If the latter option is chosen, then it will be declared that you bastards are dead. Coming back here once again isn't permitted and all the connections made until now must be severed」

「……Will you forgive me?」

Murmuring as though partly in a daze, Clara uttered that.

「About what?」

But, in a haughty manner, Harold asked that question in return. As for Kazuki, he wanted to tell -「What is it about?」- and play dumb with a smile.

First of all, the cause of this racket was when Harold bumped into Clara, who was watering the flower bed, and after slipping down he got dirty. It was clear that it was a really stupid incident in the game. It couldn't just be called as pitiful, getting killed for such a thing.
For this reason, the resentment Colette felt towards Harold in the original game was extremely high.

Naturally, Kazuki didn't even think of it as anything and it wasn't as though he was angry, since his consciousness only surfaced after the incident.

「It's fine, so quickly choose. As for me, it would be convenient and helpful if I killed you here and now」

「……I'm extremely sorry. I feel that I still want to continue living with this girl」

(Right~)

With this, if she told something like -「Please kill me」- all the troubling things he had worked for, would come to nothing.
First of all, there was no way Kazuki could carry out the act of killing people.

「Fu~n, boring. Then, take this and go」

Kazuki produced a jute bag from his breast pocket and casually threw it towards them. Opening that drawstring bag and casting a glance at the insides, Clara stiffened up due to being surprised once again.

「Th, this is ……..?」

「Consolation money. Don't spout out that you don't know what it means」

「–Thank you very much」

Clara put her hands on the ground and with a quivering voice, expressed her gratitude. The money itself was the allowance his father had given, when Harold had told that he wanted a sword and so, it was hard for Kazuki to accept that gratitude frankly.

「I'll give this to you」

As though hiding his embarrassment, Kazuki also handed over a thing to Colette. It was a necklace which had the emblem of the knight order of the Saint King -a single-edged sword imitating wings, giving off a silvery obsidian shine- as an ornament. It was an article which he had discovered when he was in the middle of thoroughly searching Harold's room.

「Never let this part from you, always wear it around your neck. This is the condition for letting you bastards run away. Understood?」

「Ye, yes」

Although she was frightened, Colette nodded.

「…….But, if a guy who wants it appears, give it to him. Only give it to a guy whose age is around yours and appears to be a bit skilled. In exchange for that, make him promise to protect you as a knight」

「Uhh……?」

Colette was confused at Harold's excessively detailed orders. Even if

he wanted to explain it in a more simplified manner, his mouth wouldn't allow him to do that.
Thereupon, a timely help came from beside him.

「Harold-sama is telling you to hand it over to a person who would protect you」

Nice translation – thinking that, Kazuki clenched his fist lightly and did a Guts-pose.
Colette who understood its meaning this time, rigorously nodded her head twice.

「Un, understood」

「Then go already. It is unbearable for me to be troubled by you bastards anymore」

Turning around, Kazuki gave orders to the 2 soldiers. It was arranged that Clara and Colette were to ride the horses from here and were to be lead until the the vicinity of the highway. After that, there was no other choice than to leave it to the soldiers A, B and the coachman of the horse-drawn cart.

「Harold-sama. Really, thank you very much」

Just before straddling onto the horse, Clara and Colette together, bent their waist deeply, announced that, and then left.
Undoubtedly, they were showing their gratitude for him doing everything that was possible, for them.

However, originally speaking, Harold was the cause for all this so there was no reason for them to thank him. Certainly, if it weren't for Kazuki, Clara might have died, but in the first place, if it weren't for Harold, then there was no way they would have fallen into such a predicament.

(For a rescue operation when I'm acting in my own play, even if you express gratitude……)

At least, there was no way he could feel proud. Well, it's fine since Clara and Colette can live happily after this – thinking that, for the time being, he put a stop to the gloomy feelings in his heart.

There was one last job left to do.

「Norman, go back first」

「……Understood」

Norman responded to Harold's command after hesitating for a breath. Looking at Harold's expression, which seemed as though he was brooding over something, he hesitated because he was thinking whether it would be fine to leave this boy alone.
However, that expression returned back to a calm one in a very small amount of time. In that case, now isn't the time to unnecessarily interject – thinking that, Norman decided to withdraw.

And then, he immediately realized that it was a mistake.

While he was reluctantly heading back to the mansion, the wind carried Harold's voice to Norman's ears.
When the voice, which was broken due to it being mixed among the sound of rustling of the tree leaves, reached his ears, Norman reflexively stopped walking.

「Ha, unsightly face……no value in living……」

The boy's voice, which could be heard faintly, contained self-derision

「No way……..forgiven……..」

As though repenting for one's sins

「Life……..useless…… At least, if…….death……,right?」

And yet, it contained a sharpness which could cut through one's body.

The monologue of a 10 year old boy. With a cleverness unbecoming of a child, he saved the parent and child, and he, who had accomplished a praise-worthy thing, was suffering.
All alone, so that no one could find out.

「It's over–『Flame Column』」

(Gou)

A thunderous roar, together with a hot wind blew through the forest. The pillar of fire, which was growing higher and higher, as though it was the manifestation of the feelings inside Harold's heart, was fiercely blazing.
As though burning down the pain contained in that small body.

The conflict held within Harold. Norman, catching a glimpse of that part and being petrified while in a daze, couldn't move until Harold came back, stamping on leaves and branches.
Seeing Norman like that, Harold's expression warped.

「What are you doing at a place like this? I should have ordered you to go back first」

Kazuki's tone became rough. This was because, just now, he had spoken out the dialog of the event.
In a place where nobody was present, mocking and laughing at a Clara who had already left long ago, and talking to himself while murmuring – this was a shame play where his dark history shined brilliantly. If somebody heard that, it was at the level where he would hang himself or at least seriously consider doing it.

Much less, if people started thinking that Harold was a sad person who had chuunibyou, then it wouldn't just end with the destruction of his character. He would have to silence anyone who would expose that shameful behavior, because if he didn't, then there was a possibility that in the future it would lead to a troublesome situation.

「Everything that happened, everything that you saw and everything that you heard today, forget about them completely. Otherwise, without telling it to anyone in the future, carry it to your grave. I won't accept an answer other than a "Yes"」

As though vigorously pressing for an answer, he keeps talking to Norman without a pause.
It was something that he was desperate for to that extent, but that desperation held a different meaning in Norman's eyes.

(Trying to hide his weakness to such an extent, why……Even though he is still a child, just how big of a responsibility is Harold-sama trying to carry)

The attitude obstinate enough to not depend on anyone else was sorrow itself.
But Norman could do nothing other than to nod his head.

Taking a glance at Norman who showed his acknowledgement, Harold left with a quick pace. That retreating figure looked as though it was extremely worn out.

Perhaps, Harold, taking his biological parents as a good example of what not to do, without having any real power presently, was trying to avoid a direct confrontation and was deceiving them.
He couldn't do anything other than that. If by chance, his thoughts were discovered by his parents due to a third party, there was no mistake that it would give rise to some discord.

If it were a normal kid, they would likely clash with their parents as it was, but since this boy was sagacious, he might have understood the dimensions by which it would affect the future, if he had done that.
For the sake of it not becoming like that, he had chosen to deceive his parents and all the people in the mansion. Thus, not a single person who had anything to do with the Stokes house could see through his facade to know what he really was like.

His motive for acting like he always was, wouldn't have been clear if it wasn't for this irregular incident, and most probably, it also wouldn't be found out in the future.
Towards the boy who was continuously fighting alone, he, who had judgemental thoughts, didn't have any rights to be worried about him.
Norman found that to be unbearably vexing.

「……No, I can't just keep regretting and do nothing」

I'm surely going to keep regretting the fact that I couldn't get close to Harold during the past 10 years, for my whole life.
But, doing only that, won't solve anything. These 10 years of inactivity, there's no way other than to get it back from using all the remaining time, from now on.

Until the day that kind boy loses the reason to keep tormenting his heart under the pretense of evil.

◇

How much time has passed from being shaken due to the cart. While stroking the hair of my daughter, who was sleeping using my lap as a pillow, I noticed the sky growing lighter. Daybreak must already be near.

But still, Clara wasn't feeling drowsy and was feeling a fluffy sensation as though she was floating in midair.
In these past 2 days, her world had turned around completely.

When she was imprisoned in the jail, she already thought that she was going to be executed. The only thing she felt was the fear towards death and despair for leaving her only daughter alone.
The one who saved her from that was a boy, whose age differed from her daughter's by only a single year.

For the sake of a servant, who could be changed easily any number of times, he had handed over clothes, horses and a cart and also, a huge amount of money for them to start a new life, free of charge.
There was no way Harold's parents, who had abused Clara by calling her an 『inferior species』, would allow such a thing. Which meant that this was something he himself had done.

While they were being escorted to the cart, she heard from the 2 soldiers about how the boy had saved them.
First, telling that he wanted a sword from a famous blacksmith in Lietze, he obtained the transit permit. He gave it for the coachman's use and then, asked him to pretend departing to Lietze early in the morning, while he hid in the forest which was in the vicinity of the highway, where there were less people, a bit away from the town.
Meanwhile, the 2 soldiers, who were in civilian clothes so that they wouldn't stand out, went to the town to loan the horses and to buy and gather the necessary goods. 「Thanks to that, we ran around the town for the whole day」- smiling wryly while telling that, but also feeling a bit proud, the soldiers narrated.

And then, after entering Brosch, Clara and Colette would remain in the village, while the horse-cart and 1 of the soldiers would continue on to Lietze. It wouldn't look to be suspicious because, on the shortest route from the Stokes territory to Lietze, they would need to pass through Brosch village.
The round trip to Lietze would roughly take 4 – 6 days, so a delay

of 1 full day was also within calculations.

When Clara heard this, she couldn't help but be surprised. A 10 year old boy had thought up such an elaborate plan in not even half a day, and had splendidly accomplished it like this.
To add to that, the money given to her was the money given to him by his father to buy a sword for himself.

Then, when they went to Lietze, they wouldn't be able to buy the sword – when Clara was worried about that, the coachman stifled his laughter.
When she asked the reason for his laughter, he told her that he had asked Harold the same question when he had revealed the series of plans to him. And, he had gotten this reply back.

「Bastard, are you an idiot. Won't it be fine if you choose a cheap sword randomly」

It was as though there was some gentleness mixed in those sharp words. Maybe he had sensed that, since hearing the coachman telling it as though it was enjoyable, left a deep impression on her.

By no means could Clara's lifetime be called as smooth sailing but still, Colette being born and encountering Harold, she thought that those 2 things were irreplaceable.

「Clara-san, are you awake?」

「Yes. Did something happen?」

「Brosch village is coming into view」

Hearing the coachman's words, she peeked out from behind.
The thing that came into Clara's view was, illuminated by the sun rays rising from the horizon and covered in morning mist, a sparkling Brosch village.

「We'll have arrived by the time the sun has completely risen. Until then, how about resting for a while?」

「Thank you for your consideration. But, for now, I want to burn this into my memory……」

「Is that so. Well, I understand, those feelings」

Clara, the coachman and even the 2 soldiers, had their hearts stolen by the scenery which was like an illusion.
By that form of Brosch village, which was as though it was blessing Clara's and Colette's new life.

Chapter 5

Listening to Harold's report, his parents believed that Clara and her daughter Colette, were dead. It was unlikely that they would even think of doubting their son.
Even though their son had killed a woman and her child, seeing them only praising him extravagantly by telling – 「You have talent in magic」, Kazuki felt that the gap between him and his parents would never be covered in his whole lifetime. As long as they didn't rid themselves of this kind of sense of values, there was no way he could see eye-to-eye with them.

Well, because of them blindly believing in him, they didn't doubt anything he told. So for now, that was more than enough-was what he thought.
For now, it could be said that the plan to rescue Clara and Colette was a success.

Truthfully, this was when he should've been happy, but confronted by a new problem, for Kazuki, time was precious. The most he could do was to pray that Colette would get close to Liner.
Leaving that aside, the thing that was troubling Kazuki was how to deal with the growing displeasure of the populace, due to the political pressure of the Stokes family. In short, it could be summed up as severe taxation.

Since the Stokes territory, with the exception of the towering mountain range to the northeast, was facing the plains, and the highway was laid out as though running beside the city, it was considerably blessed in the field of transportation. There were no seas in the surroundings, but there was a river formed by a stream from the mountain range, which passed nearby, and a forest stretched out from the northwest to the eastern side so, it was a land suitable for forestry too.
The circulation of people and money was good, and nature was abundant. Naturally, both primary and secondary industries were prosperous.

However, since the Stokes territory wasn't very vast, they couldn't make use of those benefits. Advanced despite being a small town –

was the scope of it.
On a self governing area with that scope of economy, the Stokes family was imposing quite a heavy tax.

For the residents living in the vicinity of the town center, who had considerably high income, it wasn't as though they couldn't pay the tax, but for the agricultural community living in the suburbs, it was quite a burden.
Particularly, in the recent years, being assaulted by natural disasters as though it was an annual occurrence, the volume of crops harvested was unfavorable, and due to that, profit went down and the farmers running under deficit weren't less.

For that reason, voices rose up from the farms, appealing to reduce the tax temporarily, but there was no way that couple would lend their ears for something like that. On the contrary, the pressure was tightened by telling - 「If you make any more noise, I will raise the tax rates even more」 - It was dealt by threatening them like that.

There were talks about how the populace suffered from the political pressure in the game, but there were no detailed descriptions about that portion. It was likely that, without Norman's documents, even Kazuki wouldn't have noticed this.
If the present condition lasted for a long while, the displeasure accumulated due to the pressuring of the Stokes family would without a doubt, explode at some point of time. That would be the first sign of indication to the fall of the Stokes family.

Well, for Kazuki, no matter what happened to this family, it didn't have anything to do with him, but the chances of him getting involved and undergoing a disastrous experience was extraordinarily high and so, there was no way he couldn't take some measures.

「Excuse me～……Tte, what are you doing?」

Showing his face from the opened door, without even waiting for a reply from knocking the door, was the accomplice who helped in rescuing Clara, Zen – the coachman of the horse-drawn cart.
Somehow, as of late, even though there was no work for him, it became as though he was involved with whatever Harold was

doing. No matter how harsh his speech was, other than laughing dryly, it was as though he wasn't enduring at all.

Zen was 19 years old, a youth in the same generation as Kazuki. Also, among the males who were working in the mansion, his age was the closest to Harold, and in Kazuki's mind, he was an existence that Kazuki could easily associate with.
He was somewhat like a dog, or rather, it could be said that Zen's personality played a big role in making people feel friendly towards him.

He tilted his head when he saw Kazuki's eccentric behavior.
Even though it was called eccentric, he was just recording the growth of plants which were there on the balcony of about 50 cm, furnished on the window.

「It is unrelated to you. Quickly, close the door」

「O～tto, It somewhat has the scent of a secret」

Closing the door behind him, as expected, Zen spouted out some dog-like remarks and peeked at the balcony. As for his attitude, it could be said that it was disrespectful at best.
About 20 potted plants were lined up on the balcony, which were divided into 3 segments and 3 types of plants were being grown.
For some reason, there were some specimens among them whose growth was preeminent.

「Bell tubers and Bluna, and also red Groot……Are you going to eat them after they grow up?」
(Tl – What are those? (ノ☌益☌)ノ┻┻ I suck at translating katakana. HELP
The original – スズイモにブルーナ、それに赤グルト(suzu imo ni buruna, soreni aka guruto))

「Do you want me to cut out your guts and, including the pot, shove it inside your stomach?(※Should I make Zen eat it?) 」

「No thanks!」

「……」

If it is like this, we might never have a relaxed conversation- while being depressed by that thought, his hand kept moving while recording.
As Zen stated, all of these were edible vegetables. Frankly, only leaves couldn't be seen under the earth for bell tubers and it's name fit it correctly.
Adding onto that, it was in the top three most cultivated principal crops of the agricultural community in the Stokes territory.

「Even so, the way they've been grown is different, isn't it」

Without being cowed by Kazuki's statement, Zen asked that with a look filled with interest. A heart made of steel or tough nerves, either way, he was resilient.
While admiring Zen, who seemed to have the endurance level of a sandbag, Kazuki held out a glass bottle.

「There are those which were watered with water mixed with this, and those which weren't」

The thing held in Kazuki's hand, which was familiar to all fans of 『Brave Hearts』, was a semi-transparent bluish bottle. The thing which was extremely handy only at the start of the game, an item which doubled the stamina recovery rate.
It's name is 『Life Potion』.

「Life Potion for crops……..?」

He had never heard of a technique like that to cultivate crops. But, the ones which were given the Life Potion were obviously bigger and juicier.
Zen's eyes showed shock at Kazuki's thinking which wasn't bound by any common sense, but for Kazuki, it was just another simple thought.

In the system of 『Brave Hearts』, "Compounding" existed. By mixing many different ingredients, items were created, but for some of the ingredients, if one didn't cultivate them on their own, they wouldn't be able to get their hand on them.
Furthermore, even if one nurtured ingredients according to the manual, since the probability of cultivating the wanted ingredients

was extremely low, the players plowed the fields with the intentions of getting some hits.
(Tl – The players follow the Japanese saying – Even a poor marksman will hit the target with enough shots)

Eventually, the fact that the harvest rate goes up when Life Potion or the upper ranked 『Ether』 is used, became known, and then, players who changed to Hero-cum-Farmer started scattering recovery items on the fields.
Similarly, Kazuki was also one of those players.

To test whether that could be applied even here, Kazuki obtained the pots, soil for the crops, the crop seeds and also the Life Potion approaching its expiration date, which was sleeping in the warehouse of the Stokes house, through Norman.

But, when the crops were grown using only Life Potion, even though their growth was fast, they withered before bearing fruits.
So, while using it with water, many trials were repeated, and finally, a suitable ratio of water and Life Potion was found.
Kazuki tore off a few of the red groot and tossed it towards Zen.

「O～to～to」

「Eat」

「Raw?」

Zen, who nimbly caught all of them, didn't even hide the unpleasant expression on his face, listening to Harold's orders.
He understood those feelings. Among the vegetables Kazuki knew, the taste of red groot was closest to onions.
Even though it could be eaten without sticking it in fire, fundamentally, it seemed to be a vegetable which was cooked by heating.

「Curse your own thoughtless actions for willingly sticking your head into others' affairs」

「…….Eei, W,well!」

Maybe giving up, without resisting anymore, Zen bit into the red

groot.
Shaku- A satisfying sound rang out.

「Nn!?」

Zen, who had swallowed the red groot, raised an excited voice.

「What is this! It is sweeter than normal and absurdly delicious!?」

It felt good to see such a reaction. That the Life Potion farming method would have such an effect, this exceeded even Kazuki's expectations.
Even though it was a happy miscalculation, as expected, having only Zen as feedback was too less.

「Take that to the kitchen and come back after making the cooks eat it. Their thoughts on the taste, the difference between the ordinary ones, whether it is worth putting it on the market, and other such information, ask them about it」

「Roger!」

Zen bowed with a snap. Since he was holding the red groot in his left hand, it didn't look appropriate.

「The matters of where you obtained it or under whose orders you are moving–」

「Is a secret, isn't it? I understand, Harold-sama!」

Zen answered like that with a full-faced smile.
For him, his assessment of the boy known as Harold had completely changed due to the previously executed plan.

Until now, he had only thought of him as an extremely conceited, self-centered, dumb brat, but it seemed as though he was only pretending like that with some sort of aim. Harold's true nature was rather, the exact opposite of that.
Kind, racking his brains for people with a lower social status than his, he had both emotional maturity and wisdom.

After coming to know about that, he could only see Haorld's foul-mouthed nature as nothing but hypocrisy. In a sense, it could be said that the only way Harold could seem to be childish was by this. Like this, for entering the room and talking about this and that, other than spouting out abusive words, he didn't seem to be displeased.

Considering Harold's age, he should be aware about things like the difference in social status. It would have been fine if the other party

was a person who had a close relationship from childhood, but the first time Zen talked with him was just the other day.
When a person like that showed disrespectful behavior, it was as though he didn't mind it at all.
Behavior as though to show that he had no interest in keeping up a facade.
For Zen, such a Harold Stokes was highly likeable.

It was clear that again, he was trying to do something with this red groot. Surely, it was something which he, who had no knowledge, could never even think of.
Zen was happy to help in whatever form it might be.

Chapter 6

「Then, I'm off!」

And so, after receiving Harold's command, Zen rushed out of the room in high spirits. Since he didn't know why Zen had so much enthusiasm, the only thing he did was to tilt his head in puzzlement.
It would be good if he doesn't mess up due to being too enthusiastic – thinking that, he felt a tinge of anxiety.

Well, if he trusted in Norman's judgement, nothing bad will happen – convincing himself with that, as a change of pace, he decided to start his sword training, which was about to become a daily routine.

This was the world of an RPG. Outside the range of humans' livelihood, normally, monsters were strutting about. To survive in this extremely dangerous world, it went without saying that a certain level of strength was required. Much less, when Kazuki needed to jump in and live within a vortex of violent battles as Harold Stokes.

He wanted to avoid fighting as much as possible but that wasn't possible in accordance to the original game event.
Therefore, in order to be prepared for emergencies, he started imitating swordsmanship.

When he went to the backyard, holding the sword purchased by Zen in Lietze, after confirming that nobody was present in the surroundings, he started implementing the training menu that he himself had thought up.

Grasping the hilt in both hands, he raised it overhead and brought it down in one swing. From that state, switching his grip to the left, he moved his right hand by 1 unit to the upper-right side. From there, making the right foot on which he had stepped forward as the axis, he rotated in clockwise direction, and using centrifugal force, he cut in a straight line from the left.

This was the basic combination which Harold used in the game.

This was of the type of serial barrage which appeared when the attack button of the controlled character was spammed thrice.

Kazuki, who didn't even have experience in Kendo, couldn't judge whether or not this attack would really be effective in actual combat, but for now, he thought of making this as his base.
At first, like the practice-swings in Kendo, he practised by stepping forward and cutting down from the overhead position, but imagining actual combat, he felt that the benefits of practising moves similar to the ones in the game was larger.

When close to a month passed after starting a training like this, his body grew accustomed to the movements themselves. The sense to grasp that, wasn't Kazuki's, but was probably Harold's.
Come to think of it, even though Harold was the lowest of bastards, traversing solo through a dungeon and clashing with the hero party, in battle, he was quite an outstanding character. If I keep training like this seriously, I might be able to obtain strength which isn't inferior to that.

(If I thought of it like that, my tension rises up a little!)

Even encountering an irrational situation, thinking in a manner like that, as expected, Kazuki was a fan of 『Brave Hearts』 through and through.
Although he had possessed the most loathed person in the original work, when it became that he might be able to use the same skills as the ones inside the game, he couldn't suppress his heart from dancing.

With determination and excitement as the source of encouragement, Kazuki silently continued swinging his sword. A small boy lightly brandishing an adult-sized sword – if seen from an outsider's perspective, it was quite a bizarre scene.

Originally, he wouldn't even be able to decently swing it, but Harold's high-spec body compensated for that. But even Kazuki didn't notice that fact.
Somehow, the boy known as Harold appeared to be excellent.

Thus, providing assistance in the cultivation of crops, sword

training, and humoring his parents – after these became his routine, about a month and a half passed by. Around the time when all the potted plants in the balcony grew lush and thick, at last, the preparations for the next move were completed.

That day, the one whom Kazuki summoned to his room was a slender man, who wore glasses. With an age in the first-half of his thirties, maybe due to the sharp look in his eyes, he gave of an impression of being cold and unfeeling.
The man's name was Jake. One of the people who managed the finances of the Stokes family. Even the usually unamiable, taciturn Jake was considerably perplexed by the situation he was in.

There were totally 3 people in the room. The owner of the room, Harold, the veteran servant, Norman, and Zen.

「Sit」

To him who had come to the room, the first thing Kazuki said after opening his mouth, was that.
Norman, who was diagonally behind Harold, handed over a draft containing a few pages to Jake, who had quietly sat down on the chair.

「Read that」

「Ok」

What on earth is this about – Jake's bewilderment kept growing.

However, after he opened the draft and started reading its contents, the look in his eyes changed.
What was written down was the detailed financial situation of the Stokes house. It was filled with a headache inducing amount of numbers, but sadly, they were numbers which Jake had become used to seeing.

「Are there any large mistakes in the entry?」

「……No, there aren't」

Let alone mistakes, this was a complete copy of the contents of the

financial management report that Jake had compiled. He properly checked whether there were any defects or not in the documents he had prepared.
Perhaps, was he called to enter at least 1 false charge into the contents of this? – That sort of thought crossed his mind.

「Right?」

But, contrary to his predictions, Harold sighed gravely. There was no appearance of wanting to rebuke Jake.
If he had to say, then Harold's voice was as though he was fed up from the bottom of his heart.

「From the past few years, the finances of the Stokes house has been in the red. The prime cause is the pointless extravagance due to my parents wanting to put on airs. The reserves from up until the previous generation and the heavy taxation is compensating for it but even that won't last long, and the burden on the populace only keeps increasing. Any objections to this opinion?」

「I have awareness that it is heading towards that direction」

Jake's emotional subtleties never easily surfaced, but inside, he was on the verge of panicking.
He was astonished that a young boy had perfectly comprehended the contents of the financial management report, but more than anything, he wasn't able to grasp the intentions of the question at all.

Harold himself, being the eldest son of the head, was criticising his parents, the current head. He didn't know what kind of behavior was right.
Being at a loss, Jake looked at Norman. But he was only standing behind Harold with a calm expression and it didn't seem as though he would respond to Jake's glance.

「Even though the situation isn't urgent, as it is, someday, both the Stokes house and the populace won't be able to maintain their livelihood. Well, for you bastards, it would be better if the Stokes house collapses」

「Please don't say things like that. If anybody heard it, they would misunderstand and think that you are rebelling」

For the time being, Jake takes the safe route.
However, from Kazuki's point of view, it wasn't necessarily a misunderstanding. He hadn't thought of outrageous things like causing internal problems to steal the inheritance and he hadn't even thought of doing whatever it takes for the continued existence of the Stokes house and for becoming the next head.
Frankly speaking, he wouldn't care even if it got crushed like in the original work.

Together with the ending of the original work, if he faded out and safely became commoner A, it would be fine.
Of course, the best solution would be for him to return back to his original world as fast as possible, but to do that, he hadn't even found a single clue and so, for now, he put it aside.

「Hn. At any rate, the populace, particularly, if the agricultural district's proceeds aren't increased, it's very clear that in the near future, we'll go bankrupt」

Jake couldn't respond. This was because it was true that the agriculture in the Stokes territory had already started declining. Due to imposing a heavy tax rate, since management became strained, people who quit and people who left from the Stokes territory increased. This trend was remarkable with small farmhouses in particular.

If this flow didn't stop, revenue from the agricultural district would drop considerably. When that happened, it wasn't known whether the current head would resolve to loosen the tax rates due to the disadvantage.
Jake didn't believe that that man would take such measures. Conversely, he would probably increase the rates even more and pluck money from wherever it could be plucked.

(Has Harold-sama comprehended that……?)

No matter what, it wasn't a problem which a boy of 10 years old, would rack his brain's for. Normally, it would be difficult to even

read the contents of the financial management report correctly.
But, for the boy in front of him, it seemed as though something of that level wasn't even a wall. Jake immediately realized that.

「That is why I called you. I'll leave the inspection of the agricultural district to you」

「What do you mean」

「Zen」

「Hai Hai!」

Responding to Harold's call, Zen opened the window connected to the balcony, picked up a basket in which red groot were bunched up, and with a thud, placed it in front of Jake.
Again, being unable to catch up to the situation, his eyes became dots.

「Um, This is……?」

「Now, now, without saying anything here, relish in Harold-sama's handmade red groot」

「You are the one who's talking too much. Do you want to become fertilizer?」

「Sorry!」

「By Harold-sama…..?」

If he frankly expressed his thoughts, it would be 「Why?」.
He didn't know why Harold was cultivating vegetables in his room and, he also didn't know why Harold was trying to make him eat it.
That said, since it was taken out like this, he couldn't not try it, so timidly he bit into a red groot.

「……! S, sweet?」

「Right?」

「Why the hell are you proud…….」

Watching Zen show no sign of respect to Harold, Jake's innards went cold, but without even rebuking him, Harold just held his temples as though he was amazed by Zen.

「Anyways, the thing you ate just now was something I raised with my own method. Lend me your power to spread that method」

「Why me?」

「To implement this farming method, naturally, there will be some costs, and depending on the situation, exclusive equipment might be necessary. Since you have thorough knowledge of Stokes' finances and as an inspection official, since you also know the situation well, I judged that you would be suitable」

Certainly, calculating the necessary expenses if the required materials and their rough quantity were decided, and depending on the equipment, deciding whether installing them would be acceptable or not or making proposals to satisfy some conditions, all these could be done if it were Jake.
Harold's point was logical.

The problem was whether spreading the new farming method was implementable or not.
Compared to the normal ones, it was remarkably easy to eat this red groot. It could be guessed that if this went out on the market, the demand would be great.

But if the manufacturing cost was equal to or more than the market price, then there would be no meaning in doing it. There might also be farmhouses which might not be able to endure until the deficit, increased due to the initial expenses, changes over to net profit.
It was a huge problem for implementation.

「It seems like you can think」

Towards Jake, who remained silent even when asked for cooperation, rather than feeling hurt, Harold was in admiration of him.
For Kazuki, rather than people who would agree for everything due to pressure from their superiors, he needed people who would think

about things with their own head like this. Kazuki only knew about the parts which were depicted in the game, and people like Jake and Norman, who were likely to notice problems other than the ones he knew, would be dependable hereafter.

「If it could improve the present condition, I would help as much as possible. But…….」

「You can't readily agree since you just heard the talk, right? If it were father, he would have angrily told you to not talk back or in the worst case, thrown you into the dungeon」

Listening to those words, Jake's body stiffened and thought – As expected, after all, he is the son of that man.
But for some reason, Norman and Zen smiled wryly.

「……..Well, that is the natural reaction. If it was readily consented for without even asking for detailed explanation, there would be another Zen and so, my anxiety would only increase」

「What does that mean?」

「It means that you should also use your head a bit more」

「You're awful…….」

Ignoring the easily depressed Zen, Kazuki continues the conversation.
From here, the real issue began.

「Well then, as you wished, let me inform you. This will become the key」

While showing the bottle of Life Potion, he began explaining to Jake.
Kazuki's plan was like this.

The farming method of giving Life Potion to the crops, temporarily named as LP farming method.
At present, of the 3 kinds of vegetables tested upon, it was confirmed that all of them had fast growth and additionally, their sweetness had increased.

This wouldn't be tested in all the fields abruptly, but to start with, a portion, that too, by having some of the farmhouses do a joint trial run. The biggest reason was to disperse the financial risks if it failed.
Additionally, this also had implications of rescuing farmhouses with a small operation scope where even a single mistake would be fatal, those who had a painful monetary situation, and those who couldn't spare farmland for the LP farming method.

Even if the LP farming method went well, the growth of disparity between farmhouses which have some financial leeway and those that don't, must be held back as much as possible, and after bunching up a few of the farmhouses, it would be ideal if the Life Potions about to be discarded, among the ones stored in the Stokes house, would be enough to deal with the situation. If this was done, even the initial costs wouldn't be much.

During this 1 month, Harold had repeated cultivating crops many times, and the greatest feature was that the growth rate of crops grown using the LP farming method was considerably fast.
It was at the level of calling it bizarre. In the case of red groot, normally, it would take a little under 2 months for it to be harvested after its seeds were planted, but the ones given Life Potion could be harvested in 5 days to a week. In the game, if one planted the seeds and stayed overnight in an inn, they could harvest it the next day, but as expected, there wouldn't be such a growth rate over here.

Anyway, with this rotation like speed, Kazuki estimated that even small fields would create profits.

「Harvesting is possible in just 5 days!?」

Due to the shocking fact, even the usually calm Jake involuntarily raised his voice.
Ground-breaking, it was a discovery that could be called revolutionary.

「But, due to that speed, care should be taken to not overdo it」

「Why?」

「If cheap and high-quality goods appeared in large quantities, the market might crash. As a result, there are chances of farmhouses outside the Stokes territory getting crushed」

Even though the LP farming method was a little costlier than the traditional ones, due to the growth being fast, a large quantity could be produced in a short amount of time. If the production went on the right track, with price equal to the common ones, if production in large quantities became possible, even if trade took place with even cheaper prices, there would be profits.
Using that to not provoke resentment – that was Kazuki's true motive. More than anything, the thing that was important was protecting oneself.

If the fact that the one who invented the LP farming method and spread it out was Harold, was exposed, there were possibilities of getting resented unjustly.
But if his parents, who were attached to money came to know about it, they would monopolize the LP farming method. To avoid that, Kazuki thought that going small scale and detailed, and limiting the quantity of harvested crops would be a good way to start.
And then, after it had gradually progressed, when there was some financial leeway, it would be possible to test the LP farming method on other crops too.

At present, it was known that with a ratio of 1:1 of water to Life Potion for red groot and bell tubers and also, a ratio of 7:3 with water as 7 for bluna, it would be easy to grow them, and they would also taste good.
When bluna was given 100% Life Potion, it was at a level where, if it was planted at morning, then it could be harvested at dusk. This was discarded because, when Zen took it to the kitchen, they told that it didn't taste good.

In other words, depending on the ratio of Life Potion given to the crops, there would be differences in the growth speed as well as the taste. If matters like that were tested on common crops, then the revenue from the agricultural district would also become stable at a high level.
This time's work could also be called as laying the groundwork to obtain that source of capital.

「Normally, it would start out by assembling a team of experts, but……」

To do that, he would need to talk to his father. But an image of his parents, whose eyes were blinded by money, came into Kazuki's mind.
He didn't want to birth discord among farmhouses and he also didn't want unnecessary resentment from other nobles. Even if it wasn't possible to hide it until the end, he wanted to reconstruct the financial conditions to the extent of improving the financial situation of farmhouses, until they were able to procure the required amount of Life Potions by themselves.
No matter how much of a headache it was, to avoid the death flag, he had no choice but for it to become popular.

Suddenly becoming aware of it, Jake, who was listening to the explanation, was staring open-mouthed. Even Norman had a similar expression, and Zen was half-asleep, unable to keep up with the conversation.
Giving up on Zen, Kazuki wondered what was going on with the expressions of the remaining 2.

「Do you bastards have a hobby of exposing such idiotic looking faces?」

「F, forgive me. It was just that I was astonished by the contents of the talks……」

「Though I had heard about it to some extent before, I am in admiration that you have given it so much thought」

(Admiring the idea of an amateur to such an extent, inversely this makes me uneasy……)

Kazuki had no expert knowledge in economics or management.
For now, this was the material for presenting only the general framework.
From here on, it would be setting a limit and polishing out the finer details, but he was wondering whether the 2 reliable people were fine or not.

「I'll tell this first. I don't need a yes-man. If you find any odd points, without exceptions, give proposals. Alright?」

Or else, it would be dangerous for Kazuki's heart due to the pressure.
Those feelings went through to Norman and Jake in a different manner.

(Discovering a ground-breaking cultivation method which could overturn history at that age and yet, having the intellect to come out with a realistic political plan. Besides, not being proud and being strict on oneself, and has an insatiable desire to improve oneself)

(Not even looking at the easily obtainable money or honor, having strong feelings and deep affection to earnestly try to save the people)

–Harold is a person born with the caliber to stand above people.

Intuition close to conviction.
He was emitting the kind of charisma, where one would think of wanting to follow him.

「Well then, the final confirmation. Jake, will you act as my hands and feet?」

To that question, the intent to shake his head horizontally didn't even remain.

「I will use all the power that I possess for the sake of Harold-sama」

「If you want to be useful for me, work for the populace instead of working for me. They are the weak, who wouldn't even survive if something like that isn't done」

Arrogant until the end but always working for the weak.
That way of living was prouder than anyone else's.

Chapter 7

「If you've understood, begin immediately. Norman, consolidate all the things I've explained just now into a document in order to convince the people. If there are any obscure points or parts that worry you, without omitting anything, ask me」

「Understood」

「Jake, divide adjacent farmhouses as uniformly as possible, based on their operation scale. I will specify the area of the field required for cultivating crops, so you don't need to consider it」

「Understood」

Since he had told them this much, then it seemed as though the rest would be taken care of by the 2 who seemed to be capable. For now, only this much can be done – thinking that, as he was leaning back on the chair, his eyes met with Zen, who was still in the room.

「……What?」

「What should I do, Harold-sama」

Zen asked, his eyes shining brightly.
But sadly, he had no work until they headed towards the site.

「Don't do anything. Or rather, go back to your own work」

In the first place, Kazuki hadn't called for Zen. Since he was hanging around in the room like always, Kazuki was just pushing him around.

「I have a holiday today!」

「What the hell did you come here for?」

Kicking Zen, who was giving a thumbs-up, in the back, he drove him out of the room.
In the room which was empty, he sighed deeply.

With this, the first stage was completed. All that was left was to wait for Norman and Jake to complete their preparations.
He didn't know how much time it would take, but for now, he could be at ease for about a week.

However, just when had thought like that, a new problem came unexpectedly.
That happened during dinner. Harold's father suddenly dropped a bomb on the dining table.

「Harold, your marriage partner has been decided」

The reason why he didn't spurt out the fruit juice which was in his mouth was because Kazuki already knew that Harold had a fiancee. Even so, he couldn't hide his surprise since he was spending all his time on the pile of problems which were in front of him, and he had forgotten about the existence of Harold's fiance.

「Marriage partner? Who is it?」

Even while feeling the shamelessness inside, he asked back with a seemingly similar response.

「The daughter of the Sumeragi family. Accurately speaking, it's only engagement, but with this, the Stokes family's lineage will become stronger」

「Oh, That's wonderful!」

His parents were chuckling in high spirits. Certainly, for these 2 who were for the pure-blood principle, it would be quite the good news.
The Sumeragi house was one among the noble houses who had helped in the founding of this country, and from their organization, even now, their ties to the kingdom was deep. If they were connected by blood with such a house, then the prestige of the Stokes house, who supported the pure-blood principle, would rise.

「And so, the other party is telling that, by all means, they want to meet you. We'll head towards the Sumeragi territory soon」

Absolute lies – somehow, he stopped himself before he could tell

that. But Kazuki, who had knowledge about the original work, knew that the Sumeragi side weren't enthusiastic about this engagement.
Originally, there was an overwhelming difference in status between the Stokes house and the Sumeragi house. Even then, the reason why this engagement was being held was because of the original work's scenario.

(Huh, Wait a sec? Perhaps, this phase is…….)

By the time the information in his head came together, an ingenious idea was formed.
Since talks about the engagement were already out, there were no mistakes that there was already some damage to the Sumeragi side. However, the damage should still be to the minimum since it was before the start of the original work, and if Kazuki interfered, the possibility of stopping the damage from expanding should be plenty. There would be some effects on the story so he wouldn't be too enthusiastic, but since it concerned human life, he decided that he couldn't go without sacrificing something.

「When do you mean by soon?」

「In another 2 to 3 days」

(Haa–!)

In that interval, he wouldn't be able to gather necessary items. Particularly, the items which could only be obtained as item drops from defeating monsters, were a problem.

Well, different from the game world where items could be bought only in limited shops, since there was economic activity in this world, there was a possibility that the items might be circulated, and if he thought about it carefully, even if he collected the necessary items, he couldn't show their effect only in the Sumeragi territory.
In that case, the best thing he could do was to write it in a letter beforehand, and send it to the Sumeragi family without his parents' knowledge.

As soon as Kazuki finished eating, he withdrew into his room, and based on his memory, he started recalling the recipe for creating a certain powder.

(Anise hisopp and fang of Gadun, Reel grass……. And what else? If I'm not mistaken, there was something that seemed like traditional Chinese medicine……)

Compounding in 『Brave Hearts』 was not only for creating recovery items, but also for weapons and armor and sometimes, even machines, using a vast amount of combinations.
Even for Kazuki, who had crammed nearly all of those into his head, it was a pain to recall the details.
In the end, by the time he recalled the details of a total of 5 compounding items and wrote a letter to the Sumeragi house before he forgot, it was already dawn, and sunlight was entering through the window.

As a result, holding the letter which was written satisfyingly, as planned before, 3 days after that dinner, Kazuki, who rode in a carriage for the first time in his life, headed towards the Sumeragi territory.
The complete journey took 9 days. If they hadn't made camp, it would've been shortened by a few days, but there was the high class Stokes family's current head.

Due to something like – There are things other than camping, it was inevitable that they stayed in the best inn in the town, every single day. But it was fortunate that they didn't run into strong monsters, since they didn't travel during the night when monsters were highly active.
Kazuki didn't bother asking whether it was all right with his work, since the round-trip would take about 3 weeks.

And so, with there being no problems, other than the time spent alone with his father being great, they arrived at the Sumeragi's mansion at the end of their journey.

It's appearance was that of wooden architecture, which made one think that they were in the Japan of the olden days. Red light baskets were dangling from the eaves' edges, the sound of a

bamboo fountain was ringing out from the yard and a vibrant tree with cherry blossoms was towering up. It was a place which was overflowing with Japanese-style taste.
The setting was that the Sumeragi house was succeeding the flow from the east, and so not only the mansion, but even the townscape was pure Japanese-style.
(TL – The bamboo fountain in Japanese is shika odoshi or shishi odoshi which literally translates to deer scarer, and I assume that you've all seen it in a lot of anime. Here)

「Welcome. Master and Madam have been waiting, so please, this way」

A white-haired elderly man was lying in wait for them at the main entrance. From his attire and bearing, Kazuki felt that he was no ordinary servant.
Under his guidance, they entered the mansion.

「I somehow can't settle down due to removing footwear inside the house. Even these things called inner-footwear」

「Since this is the culture of the Sumeragi house, please show consideration」

Next to his complaining father, Kazuki lined up the boots he had taken off, in a practiced manner.
After doing it, 「Ah, This isn't like Harold」- he noticed.

However, since it seemed as though they didn't notice it, he felt relieved.
After that, the elderly man finally stopped after walking through the open corridor wandering through about half the mansion.

「Master, I have brought Hayden Stokes-sama and his son, Harold-sama」

「Please, come inside」

A sombre, yet calm voice rang out from the other side of the sliding door. The old man sat on his knees, and slid the door open using both his hands.

It was a spacious Japanese-style room, with a size of about 20 tatami mats. 3 people were sitting next to each other at a wooden desk, which was placed at the center of the room.
(TL – sliding door is the traditional paper one -shoji
1 tatami/ *jō* = 1.653m^2(17.79ft^2), so 20 *jō* = 33.06m^2(355.8ft^2))

At the center was the current head of the Sumeragi house, Tasuku Sumeragi. To his right was his wife, Koyomi Sumeragi.
They were a couple, to whom the words gentle and quiet was perfectly applicable, and they overflowed with kindness. However, at present, it looked as though their expressions were dark.

And then, the issue was the presence of the expressionless girl towards Tasuku's left.
Black hair extending towards her shoulders, a hairpin with a pink undertone, which went well with her hair, and wearing a light-green colored long-sleeved kimono, was the Sumeragi house's eldest daughter, Erika Sumeragi.
(TL – Long-sleeved kimono -Furisode)

(The light in her eyes are disappearing, Oi. I can't sense any vigor……..)

With regards to her dressed up like that, it seemed as though she was a doll.
She wasn't young enough to innocently be delighted for this engagement, nor was she mature enough to hide her feelings and simply smile on the outside. But still, it seemed as though this was the result after she somehow came to terms with this situation.

But the real her was different. Erika, like her name implied, was a graceful girl who smiled like a flower.
Because Kazuki knew that, his heart tightened. It was because of him that a 10 year old girl was making such a face.
(TL – Erica is a flower – Erica Carnea)

However, again, there was nobody other than Harold who could make her stop making such a face. It would be too pitiful for her to spend 8 years like this, until she met the protagonist.

「This is the first time we are meeting, aren't we? I am the current

head of the Sumeragi house, Tasuku Sumeragi」

「……..I am Harold Stokes. Nice to meet you」

After Kazuki exchanged greetings with Tasuku, he sat on the cushion that was laid down. Unexpectedly, it seemed as though this mouth could speak in polite language.
The discussion started while he had discovered something new.

「Thank you very much for taking the trouble to come here」

「What are you talking about. It is natural」

The heads of both the houses, no matter how they really were, started conversing calmly. It didn't seem as though, for example, due to engaged parties meeting face to face, a dangerous mood would set in which would develop into a situation where they would glare at each other.
While feeling relieved, Kazuki examines the situation. Basically, while Tausku and Hayden were rambling on, providing what seemed like lip service to each other, occasionally Koyomi would smile elegantly, which didn't look as though it was forced at all.

As it was an engagement that was decided by their parents due some political reason, Harold's and Erika's turn was almost non-existent. Since there was no room for them to intervene, it couldn't be helped.

「Well? Erika-chan. Harold is quite handsome, isn't he?」

「Yes, very」

Casually, Hayden asked Erika, as a joke. The reply came back in a flash, in an extremely flat voice.

「Sorry, Stokes-sama. It seems as though this girl is nervous……」

Tasuku smoothed over it, but rather than calling it nervous, it was a tone which had almost no feelings put into. Well, it was harsh to ask a child of that age to deal with the situation maturely.
Hayden, who received such a response, didn't seem to mind it. Even

if Erika had clearly refused, he wouldn't have minded it.

「Well, it is natural to bewildered if one's marriage partner were to be decided at this age. Even Harold is the same」

「Yes. Since I am meeting someone as cute as Erika-san for the first time, even I am feeling nervous」

Since more than half of it was the truth, it wasn't as though he was using flattery, but differing from Erika, due to his manner of speech which seemed to have ample composure, it could be heard as flattery.
Even though his tone had changed, the similarity didn't disappear. It was as though the boy known as Harold had no relations to an attitude which was meek or modest.

「Well dear, since they have especially come here, how about leaving Harold and Erika together so that they can talk unreservedly?」

「Oo, that would be good!」

Hayden jumps at Koyomi's suggestion.
From here on, serious talks about the engagement would start. For Koyomi, it was unbearable to make her daughter, who actually hated this, listen to the talk. This was concern, which came from her parental affection for her daughter.

「Right. Erika, show Harold-kun around for a little while. So that you would come back by around dinner time」

「……Alright. Well then, Harold-sama, this way please」

However, for Kazuki, this was a godsend*. There was no need for Kazuki himself to broach the subject to create a situation like this.
(TL – It is actually watari ni fune, which translates to a boat coming at a crossing, which is a Japanese proverb for help arriving at the correct time)

「It is an honor to be escorted by Erika-san」

Standing up, he followed Erika and left the Japanese-style room.

From here, it was a crucial moment for Kazuki.

Chapter 8

Exiting the Japanese-style room, Kazuki was lead by Erika to a garden, which was maintained very well.
Erika, who had changed to a black lacquered geta, was walking in front, while making clanking sounds.

She stopped under a large tree, which was more than 20m tall. In a view where cherry blossom petals were fluttering about like in an illusion, she turned towards Kazuki.

「Greeting you again. I am Tasuku Sumeragi's daughter, Erika Sumeragi」

「Harold Stokes」

As soon as they finished giving their names, silence descended again. Harold's speech didn't express any kind of friendly atmosphere at all.

(Or rather, when did this tone return……)

Come to think of it, he recalled that even in the original work, Harold would always speak in a harsh tone with Erika. Perhaps, he could use polite language only in front of his superiors.

「This tree is called 『Sakura』 and it is a flower which represents our, Sumeragi house's, hometown. It wasn't existing in these lands, but it seems as though when the feudal lord of those times migrated here, he planted the sapling that he had brought with him. It is a story of about 500 years ago, but now, it has become the symbol of the Sumeragi house」
(TL – Sakura here is in katakana)

While Kazuki was being fed up at Harold's foulmouthed tone, all of a sudden he was told about the history of the Sumeragi's hometown.
Since she was troubled by the silence, for the time being, Erika started explaining about the cherry blossom tree which was in front of her eyes. It was admirable that even though her mental state wasn't calm, her spirit to serve as a guide wasn't diminished.

Honestly speaking, it was an unsuitable topic for children to speak about frankly, but for Kazuki who was familiar with cherry blossoms, it was a suitable material for him to bite onto.

「It is different from the 『Sakura』 I know of」
(Tl – Sakura here is in kanji – 桜)

The name of this tree wasn't clear in the game, but the shape of its petals and the way it was attached to the tree was different from the Somei Yoshino one could commonly see in Japan. Somehow, even the color was deeper.
So, even a type like this exists? Even though he thought of it, it wasn't as though he would get an answer.

「Do you know about Sakura?」

Although Erika was expressionless until now, her eyes wavered slightly at his reply.

「No, it's probably something different with a similar appearance. Well, that kind of thing doesn't matter」

His mouth, which was in its best condition even today, bluntly cut down Erika's question.
This was the result when he tried to just change the topic.
Being treated coldly, Erika's expression turned grim. He didn't know if that expression was hate or vigilance.

(Come to think of it, out of the people who appear, the only one that Erika loathes is me)

The easiest way to represent Erika, was without a doubt, as "Yamato Nadeshiko".
Even while being the daughter of a highly distinguished noble family, she had an attitude of not discriminating anybody, no matter who it was, and let alone allies, she would smile and be gentle even towards enemies, and she also had the tolerance to quietly support the protagonist. The amount of players who were softened down by her, who would always maintain a calm bearing, were uncountable.

The one who made such a girl enraged to the point of slapping him, was none other than Harold. To make her do something like that, in a certain sense, it was an achievement.
Although, there were some players who named Erika slapping Harold as “Reward”, and they would replay that event to appreciate it.

「In other words, does that mean you hold no interest towards the Sumeragi house?」

「Interpret it as you wish」

「……Is that so. After all, the only thing that you people want is the name of the Sumeragi, right?」

「You have nothing other than the name. Aren’t you mistaking it for that? Other than name, it doesn’t seem as though the Stokes house is inferior. Even though you people are called as prominent and prestigious nobles, it is pathetic that you can only sit and cry inside the house」

His mouth rambled on, even to the extent of astonishing himself. Thinking it would be convenient to be hated to some extent and spouting out a small amount of ill-mannered remarks, was a mistake.
It went past being ill-mannered and could be called as abusive. It couldn’t be denied that he had gone too far.

「What do you know…….!」

Erika murmured while groaning. This was 8 years before the start of the game, and since she was still a child, it seemed as though her boiling point was quite low.
Her face was hidden since she was looking downwards, but it was obvious that she was angry. It would be bad if he fanned the flames any more.
Stopping it here at driving in the wedge for the bad impression, he held out the sealed letter to Erika.

「……What might this be?」

「Shut up and accept it. And after we leave, hand it over to your father」

「I refuse」

This was what was called as no island to cling to. Completely reaping what you sow. Turning her face away, Erika started to leave.
(TL – No island to cling to is a Japanese proverb meaning being utterly helpless)

「Ah, is that so. If you want to let the people in your territory, who are suffering, die, then do so」

To those words, she involuntarily stopped.
Because, from the way Harold spoke, it seemed as though–

「……..There is a way to save them?」

「It can't be said that there is. But it is worth trying out」

Erika looked at the letter.
It looked as though she was hesitating, but Kazuki held the conviction that she would accept it if he told it like how he had.

In any case, the girl was kind. If put in other words, she was softhearted. She couldn't abandon people who were suffering or those who were troubled.
At any rate, it was to the extent of depicting her as being pained due to monsters being defeated, in the game.

Then, what would happen if she was informed that there may be a way to save the people, who were on their deathbed.
Even if it lacked credibility, and even if it was a suggestion from a person, who supported the pure-blood principle which ran contrary to her ideology, she couldn't simply ignore it without listening to it.

A gust of wind blew by, and the cherry blossom petals fluttered as though wrapping around the 2 people. After staring at each other briefly in silence, the one who moved first was Erika.

「It isn't as though I believe in your words, but…….」

Even though she had a dissatisfied expression, she firmly received the letter. For Kazuki, that was more than enough.
If it was her, she would give it to Tasuku, exactly as he had stated.

「There is no need to believe without any reason. Decide based on the results」

Well then, it wasn't known whether Tasuku would believe in the nonsensical letter written by a 10 year old and try to implement it. But if it was a failure, then he would think about it when the time came. He would think of another idea again.
Instead of sighing, Kazuki looked up and gazed at the cherry blossom tree and the blue sky covered in hazy clouds.

◇

The carriage, which the Stokes parent and child had gotten onto, bathed in gentle sunlight, slowly became more and more distant. Watching that, in contrast to the calm climate, dark clouds were gathering in Erika's heart.
One of the causes went without saying- Getting engaged to Harold.

Erika firmly understood that she didn't have a low social status. She hadn't even thought of getting married according to her own will, and there was no way she had someone in her heart.
But still, it wasn't as though she was mature enough to not hold any hope for her life and be content by sticking through with her selflessness with becoming a member of a house brazen enough to force an engagement by taking advantage of other people's weakness.

Much less, when she had heard that the current head of the Stokes house was for the pure-blood ideology, and that he treated people who didn't have noble blood, similar to objects.
That ideology was hard to accept no matter what, but for people like that, the blood of the Sumeragi house was extremely attractive.

She was frustrated at how the people who were discriminated against, were made the victim. It was so hateful that her power couldn't be of any help to the Sumeragi house or the people of the territory, that it was hard to endure.
But Erika, even though she was young, understood that by her going to the house following the pure-blood principle, a large amount of lives could be saved.

Without knowing even a bit of Erika's distress, Harold spoke ill of the Sumeragi house. It was an act which couldn't possibly be forgiven.

The letter received from such a person, was in Erika's hands. She just wanted to tear and throw it away according to her desire, but even though it was a verbal promise, she couldn't break it. Dishonoring the Sumeragi, and more than anything, compared to abandoning a chance of saving the people of the territory, who were suffering even now, she had enough spirit to swallow any amount of humiliation.

「Forgive me, Erika……」

Those words leaked out in a regretful tone from Tasuku, who was standing next to her watching the carriage leave. He couldn't honestly be delighted at making someone, who she didn't even want to be with, marry her.

Even so, if he had to make a mortifying choice to protect the lives and livelihood of several tens of thousands of people, then it was his duty as the head of the house to do so.

「Please don't mind it, Father. This is also for the Sumeragi and the people who live here」

There were no lies in those feelings.
But right now, she wanted some time to compose her heart.

「Father, this. Harold-sama asked me to give it to you after they left」

Taking out the letter, she held it out to Tasuku.

「From Harold-kun?」

While thinking that he might have been instructed by his parents to greet them for the engagement, he received the letter. Even if it was so, even handing it via Erika, Harold had specified an odd timing for it to be given to him.

「Then, I will return to my room」

「Ah, rest at ease」

Bowing towards Tasuku, who had a sympathetic smile, Erika left from the place with a quick pace.
Tasuku and Koyomi were truly concerned in their hearts. The kindness from them was all the more painful.

Looking at his daughter who was behaving in a firm manner, Tasuku condemned himself for making her bear such a heavy burden.
Even more, he was thinking whether there were any other methods, which would end up not hurting her.

「…….There's no use even if I think about it now」

Everything, this situation was all because of his powerlessness. And because of that, he had forced Erika and the people to carry a heavy burden.
He didn't even feel like mocking himself.

With a gloomy heart, he opened the letter from Harold.
The starting of the letter had a seasonal greeting, which was unlike something written by a child. With that itself, Tasuku didn't have a bad impression of Harold.
But as he went on reading the letter, the complacency to think about such things was blown away.

Spontaneously, power started filling his hand which was holding the letter, and by the time he had finished reading it, the whole letter was deeply wrinkled.

「Is anyone there!? Call Kiryuu!」

Tasuku's loud voice rang out throughout the whole mansion. Maybe being flustered by an unusual thing, the servants who were working in the mansion hurriedly searched for Kiryuu.
Soon, the figure of the person who was called for, appeared while making noise due to walking in a hurry. It was the elderly man, who was waiting for Harold and his father, at the gate.

「What is it, Master」

「We can't speak here. Come」

The place which Tasuku chose was the office, where nobody was present. There, he made Kiryuu read the letter from Harold.

As soon as Kiryuu finished reading, Tasuku started talking.

「That letter is from Harold-kun. What do you think?」

「…….Frankly speaking, I think this is suspicious」

「Agreed. But even if this is true or false, there is no benefit for the Stokes family」

「If so, then is it the work of a third party? At the very least, it is hard to think that it was written by the boy himself」

「At the most, he was just used as a go-between, is it」

That line of thinking was the most understandable answer. Because, the contents of the letter wasn't something that a mere 10 year old child could write.
But in that case, the biggest question wasn't cleared.

「The problem is, whose work it is. If it were some supporter of the Sumeragi, there would be no need to choose such a roundabout and unreliable method」

「Then, it's the work of someone who is against the Stokes house?」

「And that too, someone who is close enough to Harold-kun to make him accept their request, or someone who could manipulate him to any extent. To a degree of brainwashing him」

If that wasn't the case, there was no way that the letter would reach Tasuku, and even the condition written couldn't be fulfilled.
The aim of the mastermind was either the fall of the Stokes house or something that came after it. To make conjectures about it, the information was too less at the present point of time.

「It might be bad for the Sumeragi house if we try to pry into them,

but……. 」

「 If we do that, compared to the things we might gain, the risks are too high. Offering a few words, right now, the Sumeragi are in a predicament. If we watch carefully, even without hurrying, it will take the form we desire 」

It was as Kiryuu said. As long as a solution wasn't found, eventually the Sumeragi house would disappear without financial support.

「 In other words, if it is that the sender of this letter doesn't want for that to happen,…… 」

「 It is highly possible that the contents written down are true 」

This wasn't a concrete solution.
But if it was effective, the time required to explore for a solution would be produced. In that case, as written down in the letter, it would be possible to cancel the engagement and let Erika be free.

「 Kiryuu, gather the required materials at once. And after explaining the risks, employ those who still have hope 」

There was no definitive proof that the contents of the letter were true. But it was the only light that could be seen in the fog.
Even if he was dancing on someone's palm, Tasuku decided to gamble on this chance.

Chapter 9

Coming back to the Stokes mansion after about 3 weeks, there were no signs of any particular change. If there was a change, it was that Jake had started cultivating crops on his own using the LP farming method in his home garden. It seemed as though he was still dubious after only listening to it.

However, looking at it being effective, Jake, who had discovered hope in the LP farming method to break-out of the difficult economic situation, energetically started putting his efforts towards its practical implementation.
Since Norman was also skillfully moving under the surface, it still wasn't perceived by his parents. It could be said that until here, everything was going according to the plan.

And then, on a certain day after about 10 days had passed after returning back from the Sumeragi territory, when the practical implementation of the LP farming method was imminent, Kazuki, who was performing his daily training, received a notification that a visitor had come for him.

「A visitor for me?」

「Yes, that's true」

Even if such a thing was told all of a sudden, Kazuki had no idea about who it might be. As expected, even he didn't know about the relationships Harold might have had in his childhood.

「The visitor's name is?」

「It is Erika Sumeragi-sama」

Hearing the name Norman spoke of, Kazuki stopped swinging the sword.

(Why has Erika come……)

Please pardon me from any troubling situations during this strangely busy time right before the practical implementation of the

LP farming method- this was Kazuki's mental state.
In the first place, for what had she come. There was no way she would come to meet the one who had been so abusive during their first meeting.

If he thought about it, it must be some kind of response concerning the letter. He couldn't understand as to why Erika was selected as the messenger.
At any rate, even if he thought about it while holding the sword in the backyard, he wouldn't be able to make any sense of it.

「Send her to the terrace」

Hayden wasn't here since he was at work, but his mother, Jessica, was at home. Even today, since she was holding an elegant noble-styled friendly meet in the party room, and though the probability of an encounter would be low if they went to the indoor guest room, since it concerned the letter, he chose a place where it would be difficult for there to be any hindrances.
Truthfully, his room would be the optimal place, but for example, if all of a sudden he brought his fiancee into his room, it would give rise to unwanted misunderstandings, so he showed prudence. He knew that there was no way 10 year old children could cause any misunderstanding, but he took precautions just in case.

For the time being, Kazuki washed his sweat with water, and after changing his clothes, he went towards the terrace.
There, was the appearance of Erika enjoying the Black tea brewed by the waiter of the Stokes house.

Different from the other day's Kimono, today's outfit was that of a Hakama that students wore. It was a scene where it was considerably imbalanced for her, who was wearing pure Japanese-style clothes, to be sitting on a Western wooden chair.

「What did you come here for?」

While sitting down facing her, Harold asked in a really displeased voice.
If it was regarding the letter, there was no way he could let someone hear it, so for now, he made the waiter fall back by

waving his hand.

「In this situation, normally shouldn't the first sentence be "Sorry for making you wait" ?」

For Kazuki, it was his intention to tell something similar to that. It was just that the words and the nuance didn't reflect it at all.
It might have leaked out that he considered it to be a pain to talk her.

「Unlike you, I'm not free. Be grateful that I actually showed up」

「Uh…….Certainly, it is my fault for visiting all of a sudden, but……」

Erika was disheartened at being hit by sound reasoning.
Even though his point was correct, since the other person was a child, he felt as though he was bullying her.

「Fuh, well, fine. What is your business?」

Since his conscience was pricked, Kazuki quickly continued the conversation.
Sensing Harold's mood, Erika put up a dignified atmosphere in an instant.

「First of all, on behalf of the Sumeragi family, I want to thank you. On this occasion, thank you for saving many people」

Erika deeply lowered her head. Saved, which meant that after creating the compounding item that Kazuki had written in the letter, they had actually used it and it was effective.

Tasuku had received the letter about 20 days ago. If he included the time lag, it meant that he had tested it as soon as Kazuki left.
Tasuku had taken action quicker than he had anticipated.

「To jump at a counterfeit like that, it seems as though even the Sumeragi are considerably cornered」

Towards Harold who was sneering, Erika's expression didn't break down.

「It is as Harold-sama says. At present, the Sumeragi don't have any method」

「Then, I will sell that favor for a high price. But you are mistaken」

「What do you mean?」

「The thing I suggested to you bastards was just a makeshift solution. It doesn't solve anything fundamentally, and there might be side-effects」

In the game, it was just choosing ingredients and compounding them, but in reality, the proper quantity should be found by running many trials and many tests should be conducted to find the correct ratio. With all that, Kazuki didn't think that there would an effect so fast.
Adding onto that, he had absolutely no knowledge of things which weren't depicted in the game like whether there would be side effects due to intake of large amounts or due to taking it for a long period of time, or the degree of side effects if they occured.

Naturally, he had informed Tasuku about these things in the letter. The Sumeragi might have been cornered to the extent of testing it out, even though it had such huge risks.

「In other words, Harold-sama's medicine won't cure them completely, is it?」

「If the degree of the symptoms is less, complete recovery might be possible, but for patients whose symptoms are severe, it is impossible. And I don't have any intention to care about them to such an extent」

Because, the ones who would solve that was Liner's protagonist crew, and it would also be the event which would cause Erika to join the protagonist party.

It might seem to be cold, but Erika also understood.
Even if they were engaged, after all, it was a political marriage. As long as the Stokes house did their duty by the least amount, that is,

by providing goods and assisting in funding the Sumeragi, the Stokes house would be able to maintain their reputation.
And yet, Harold expressly–

(Made it……? The “medicine”?)

The question that passed through Erika’s mind.
That is, when had Harold created that medicine.

It was impossible that it was done after the engagement to Erika had been decided. Even she knew that it was impossible for her to develop a medicine in just a few days, when she had no expert knowledge in that field.

Then, since he only had the knowledge, it wasn’t created by Harold? Previously, when Erika told-「Harold-sama’s medicine」, he neither denied nor affirmed it.
Harold, till the end, only took the stance of “suggested a makeshift solution”.

But still, it was hard to think that Harold would know about an effective method when, even all of the Sumeragi put together had not been able to find it.
Even assuming that that was the case, if he had enough clinical knowledge to verify the effects even to a small extent, there would have been a considerable amount of materials or books remaining.
It was also ridiculous that he had no idea about what the side-effects would be.

(In that case, how in the world……..?)

「Is that all?」

The thing that interrupted Erika, who was deep in thought, was Harold’s voice, where he didn’t even try to conceal his annoyance.
The mood that he really wanted to send her away was transmitted.

「There’s more. I have been entrusted with a letter from father to Harold-sama」

「Hand it over」

As expected, it seemed that Erika was selected as a messenger. Tasuku might have decided that just a written letter would lack in showing gratitude, and so he had thought of personally showing his gratitude.

While sympathizing with Erika for a bit, thinking that she must have been unwilling to come here, Kazuki looked over the letter from Tasuku.

The contents were as he had expected.
The effects of the medicine, regarding the cases where there were side-effects, there were no great problems, but they would continue to carefully observe the transition, and words of gratitude towards Harold – this was what was written in the letter.

Well, at present, that was the extent to which they could report. Looking at the letter, if he conveyed his thoughts of watching the rest carefully to Tasuku, then there would be no need for him to interfere any longer.

(Nn?)

Casually thinking that there were only 2 sheets of paper, he noticed that there was 1 more sheet. It had a P.S. at the beginning.

『P.S.

As you know, since there is a strange situation going on now in the Sumeragi territory, I'm extremely busy trying to find a solution. Since this is an incident with no precedents, we don't when an unforeseen situation may rise up.
And so, though it pains me to ask any more from you, I have a request. I'm truly sorry, but could you please take care of Erika in the Stokes house for a short while. I may be disqualified as the head of a house to interpose with my personal feelings, but as a father who is concerned about his only daughter–』

Kazuki, who had read until that part, moved his eyes away from the letter. Thinking that he might have strained his eyes, after rubbing the inner corner of his eyes, he looked at the letter and read it again from the beginning.

But even though he did that, there were no changes to the words asking for his assistance to keep Erika safe.

He endured from holding his head with his hands and falling flatly on the table, but still, the voice that was squeezed out from him contained deep resentment.

「What is the meaning of this…… 」

「What is the matter? 」

In silence, Kazuki put the sheet on which the P.S. was written, in front of Erika.
After reading it, Erika spoke as though she was extremely surprised, in an indifferent tone.

「Oh, this is troubling. Even though I am the fiancee, I would be troubling many people by living under the same roof 」

「……..Oi 」

「But the carriage which brought me here has already left. There is no way other than being saved by Harold-sama's compassion 」

「Oi Bastard 」

「Yes, what is it? 」

A grinning Erika. This was the first time she had shown a full-faced smile.

「You have quite the guts 」

「I am honored to receive your praise 」

To Harold's sarcastic remark, Erika, with a refreshing face, too replied with a sarcastic remark. This matter wasn't only Tasuku's judgement, but it seems as though she also knew about it.
That is to say, Erika was trying to stay here with some kind of goal.

It wasn't simply because they were engaged. He had informed Tasuku of a method where Erika wouldn't have to marry into the

Stokes house.
Well, that was only if Tasuku believed in the contents of the letter, but he couldn't guess as to why there would be a need to send Erika over even if he didn't believe in the letter.

Adding onto that, Kazuki was baffled at Erika's behavior.
Certainly, in the game it was shown that she was playful and would play small pranks, but she didn't have the personality to reply back with spite, even if it was just in words.
It would be fine if it was just because she still didn't have a mature mental state, but that gap was more than enough to perplex Kazuki.

「I don't have any duty to accept such a one-sided proposal」

Even though all the requests from higher rank nobles were almost like orders, Kazuki rejected it without any hesitation.
Considering Tasuku's personality and the Sumeragi's current condition, he judged that it wasn't a problem.

If due to this, even if the relationship between the Sumeragi and the Stokes grew worse, that by itself would be the development Kazuki was hoping for.
Eventually, on the occasion when the engagement was cancelled, it would be fine if it came as a boost.

「You're cold, aren't you. Even though you have saved the people of another territory, you would treat your fiancee in such a blunt manner」

Erika made a sad expression, as though to show it off.
This was exactly a "made up" expression, and unlike the time when she was dejected, Kazuki's heart wasn't moved by the slightest.

「That was estimated as selling a costly favor. But for this matter, the compensation for me is too less」

「Is that so. If you are saying that much, I can't keep requesting Harold-sama any more than this」

Erika, who stood up quickly, once again bowed deeply towards Harold.

「Once again, I express my gratitude towards Harold-sama. For saving the people of the Sumeragi, really, thank you very much」

Her bow was polite ,to the extent of making him think that if they were sitting on tatami, she would have bowed while pressing 3 fingers of each hand on the floor. He felt as though he seen the true Erika, and also felt that she truly thought about the people. But just because of that, he wasn't the least bit willing to let her freeload.

「I will collect this loan in grand proportions at a later time. While you have the time, increase the number of cards you can break out as much as possible」

「Much obliged to the degree of your consideration. Well then, excuse me」

Leaving those words behind, Erika left the Stokes mansion in an unfaltering stride.
He felt suspicious at how awfully easily she withdrew. And come to think of it, how is she planning to go home without the carriage- he thought of that question only after some time had passed.

He would come to know the answer to that question a few hours later, from Hayden's mouth.

Chapter 10

While Kazuki was reading the report written by Jake at dusk, he was called by Hayden, who had come back to the mansion. Thinking -No way , and listening to the servant who had come to call Harold, he carried his legs towards Hayden's study.

Looking at Hayden's face, who had been waiting there, the bad premonition changed into conviction. This was because Hayden, who normally had a stern expression most of the times, seemed to be in a good mood.
He started talking as soon as Harold went inside the room.

「Rejoice, Harold. I have good news」「」

「Good news?」

Although Kazuki knew what Hayden would tell, with an attitude as though he was listening to it for the first time, he asked.
Though it was sad, he couldn't help it.

「A notification from Tasuku-dono reached today. For a short while, Erika-jou will be staying in the Stokes house」

As expected- thought Kazuki.
For Hayden, it seemed as though Erika freeloading was already a decided fact. Even for the Sumeragi, from the start this must have been their true motive.
But still, Kazuki tried to resist.

「I'm not enthusiastic, living together with that girl」

「No need to be shy. Because, the relationship between you and Erika-jou has officially been recognized by both families」

But Hayden misunderstood that he was feeling shy. Maybe because he was cheerful, there was no sign of him paying attention to Harold's words properly. Even though he tenaciously tried after that, without being able to overturn the desicion, eventually Kazuki unwillingly went to welcome Erika.

The next day, Kazuki went towards the East entrance which connected the Stokes territory to the highway, to welcome Erika. It seemed that the plan was that they would arrive early in the morning, but since she had shown herself yesterday, probably they had lodged in a nearby inn.
Kazuki, in a gloomy mood, was being rocked inside the carriage.

(Rather, isn't the schedule too tight?)

Even though the time it would take for a one-way trip should have been around 6 to 7 days even if they had hurried, since they had arrived the very next day, either they had no intention to listen to the reply or they knew that Hayden would accept. Well, it was probably the latter.
Either way, the possibility of this being a development not present in the original work, was high. The origin of this was without a doubt, the letter written by Kazuki.

In other words, you reap what you sow- while getting depressed, before he knew it they had arrived at the East entrance.
When he got down from the carriage with heavy steps, which seemed though he had shackles around his legs, Erika and an unknown woman diagonally behind her, were standing there.

「To be welcomed by Harold-sama personally, it is an honor」

「Ha, even though you don't mean it」

Even today, starting to destroy human relations, Harold-mouth. About 3 months had passed with him being together with this mouth, and Kazuki was getting to the point of being in admiration at the number of variations in sneering.

While feeling his useless growth, Kazuki turned his gaze towards the woman behind Erika.
Her age must have been in the later half of her tens to the mid-twenties. With a large white ribbon, her chestnut-colored hair was tied up in a bundle and reached until her waist, which left an impression.

「Who is that?」

「Juno, my attendant. She will look after my daily necessities during the stay」

「I am Juno ~」

Stretching out the words, Juno bowed with sluggish movements. Coupled with a limp smile, she was a woman with a calm atmosphere.
And Kazuki didn't know her. That is, she was a character who hadn't appeared in the original work.

「I'm warning you again, I don't have the time to look after you bastards. Staying here is your decision, but just don't get in my way」

Since he didn't know the other party's objective or Juno's identity, for now, he nailed that down.
Visitors coming at the time when the practical implementation of the LP farming method was just about to begin, as much as possible, Kazuki wanted to eliminate uncertain factors.

The 2 people accepted Harold's sharp words without getting perturbed.

「I'll keep it in mind」

「Understood ~」

(If you have seriously understood it, can't you just go back……)

Even if he complained about it, since Erika had also come here because she couldn't go against her house's circumstances, there were no methods by which he could turn them back.
In that case, it would be prudent to thoroughly avoid them.

However, there was no way that his wish would come true so easily.
Kazuki, who had returned to the mansion with them, in silence the whole way, was attacked by ruthless words.

「To show gratitude for the other day, show Erika-chan around the town tomorrow. Because, escorting a lady is also an ability required

by a noble. You won't lose anything by starting to practice from now itself」

Needless to say, it was a suggestion from Hayden.
That in itself was troublesome enough, but with Erika being Erika, answering with -「Thank you for your consideration」 as though showing good will and accepting it, Kazuki couldn't help but be at a loss for words.

Moving around due to the incident related to Erika in this long day, Kazuki was tired.
But it seemed as though when it passed through the filter called Harold, it changed into anger.

「The face you're making is more scary than usual. If you're like that, won't your fiancee will become afraid of you?」

Coming inside the room, as soon as Zen saw Harold's face, he talked bluntly. It was amazing that he could talk without any hesitation to a noble making such a face.

「That fiancee is the reason. Really, so annoying……..」

「What are you so dissatisfied about? Even though she is quite a cute girl」

「Is that so? I came to know about your tastes」

「You don't understand anything! It's a terrible misunderstanding, all right!? I prefer Juno-san more!」

Being falsely accused, Zen was frantically trying to deny it. As far as Kazuki was concerned, as long as Zen wasn't a Shotacon, he didn't care about what Zen's tastes were.
And the reason why Zen knew about this topic was because, as soon as Erika had arrived, Hayden had gathered all the people in the mansion, and in a grand manner, he had introduced them as Harold's fiancee and her attendant. Maybe he had wanted to make it an established fact, but for Kazuki, it was simply a public execution.

Incidentally, 90% of the gazes which fell onto Erika, who was

introduced as the fiancee, were filled with pity.
And there, was the faithful representation of their evaluation of the Stokes family including Harold.

「Gyaa gyaa – Stop clamoring and go call Norman and Jake. I need to adjust the plans for tomorrow onwards」

「Really, I like a grown woman, all right!?」

Zen left Harold's room, denying until the end, and while he was searching all around the mansion, Erika and Juno were also racking their brains.
The cause was none other than Harold.

「I had heard about it, but he seems to be quite a naughty kid ~」

Looking at it from Juno's age, it wouldn't be wrong to think about him as being somewhat impudent, but still settling it with only "naughty" was the extent of Juno's tolerance.
However, the main problem wasn't Harold's obnoxious behavior.

「Father told that Harold-sama is either connected to or is possibly being used by the hidden person, but……..」

「From his personality, you can't think of him listening to someone obediently ~」

Then, the possibility that Harold had become a puppet before he realized it, became higher. Making him submissive would be a considerably difficult task.

Conversely, if that behavior was acting and he was supporting the hidden person, Tasuku had suspected that by yesterday's stage, there would have been contact with this side by some method. To make it easy, they had contacted Harold when the head had been absent, at a timing when it would be hard for any interferences, fully knowing that it was rude, provocating as though to flaunt.
But the result was a miss. This made the situation even more complex.

Tasuku thought that if Harold was a puppet or even if he was moving by his own will, his objective was to either damage the

Stokes or to help the Sumeragi. Therefore, proposing for an alliance to join their hands together or warning them to not get in the way, whatever it was, he had wanted some kind of action from the other side.
But the other party was still silent, even now.

Since the other party's objective wasn't clear yet, even the Sumeragi couldn't just simply sit and twiddle their thumbs. It could also turn out to be bad to simply be under the impression that they were allies and then undergo a painful experience.
For that reason, Tasuku sent Juno to investigate it.

Erika freeloading was a smoke screen for the sake of Juno being able to infiltrate naturally, in other words, nothing more than a decoy. Erika also knew about this. The objective this time and her own role, Erika understood them perfectly.

There was only 1 thing that was unknown to her. That was, the despicable possibility that Harold, without the slightest relation to his own will, was being brainwashed.
If that was the truth–

「This might perhaps require quite some effort ~」

With a sigh not audible to Erika, Juno took out a dark device from inside her sleeve, and rang it out with a 'Kashan'.

Chapter 11

As though to sweep away the atmosphere which was a little heavy, Juno changed the topic.

「By the way Erika-sama, what do you plan to do for the date tomorrow ~?」

「Naturally, I'll go. Since it is the perfect chance to get into contact with Harold-sama」

Erika showed her spirit by clenching both her fists with a 「Mun!」 near her torso. When Harold told them not to approach him as soon as they met, she was flustered as to what she had to do, but a chance came her way due to Hayden's statement. Although Erika didn't feel good to get on with Hayden's proposal, she couldn't let it get away.

「Then, it is a must for you to dress up ~. And in that case, how about wearing Western-style clothes which you rarely wear ~」

「There's no reason to be so enthusiastic about it……..」

Juno was cheering her on since this was a date, but the partner was that Harold. It was hard to think that the situation would turn out to be that romantic.
Practically, it would just be to the level of lightly going around the inner district. More than a date, it would be more fitting to call it an inspection.

「That won't do ~. A maiden should be charming no matter what the time ~」

Like an elder sister, Juno was advocating about how a maiden should be, but rather those words should have come from Erika. Even though it couldn't be helped during work, spending even the day off in cooking wear, Erika couldn't help but think how a young maiden could dress like that. In Erika's memories, there wasn't a single time where Juno wasn't wearing cooking wear.
If she wanted to remonstrate her about how maiden should be, the persuasiveness was almost non-existent.

(TL – Cooking wear – kappōgi , you know, she's wearing it on the cover)

「How about you yourself dressing fashionably once in a while? Even though you're beautiful, it's such a waste」

「Fu Fu Fu ~, that is a strategy ~. At the critical moment, with the appeal of me being different from normal, I'll catch the other party's heart ~」

「Then, even I'll keep it in reserve until the critical moment」

「Eeeh ~, it's your first date, alright ~? If it goes well, you might be able to make Harold-sama fall for you , alright ~?」

「He shouldn't be a person who would bend down to another by something of that level」

No matter what, Erika couldn't imagine a Harold who would be soft on a girl. But it was easy to imagine him hurling abusive words at her without any mercy, even if she went all dressed up.

「Yesterday, I found such a cute one piece dress ~. Wear it, Erika-sama ~!」

「When did you buy such a thing……..」

Juno took out a one piece dress with frills from inside the luggage, and asked Erika. That appeal went past wanting to maintain a maiden's dignity or ensnaring Harold, and it was just her personal wish to see Erika wear the dress.

「Juno, we haven't come here to play around. Even you should know that, right?」

「Mmmm, it's a pity ~」

Deciding that there was no more room for negotiations, Juno returned the dress to the luggage.
Of course, it wasn't a serious exchange. Juno did it intentionally to break the mood, so as to reduce Erika's nervousness.
And because she had guessed that, even Erika didn't show too

strong an interest in it, but there was no way she could keep on being relaxed.

「Then, let us return to the real issue ~. I'll tell you about the points you need to keep in mind when in contact with Harold-sama ~」

「Right, please」

Under a single roof, the two's motives intersect. Probing around for each other's true intentions, the lock on the gun was removed.

◇

Kazuki was forcefully asked to play the role of a guide for Erika, but to accomplish this mission, he had a huge flaw. It was that he hardly knew anything about the town, where he needed to act as the guide.

In the first place, the Stokes territory was only described in a part of some conversation and in an event scene, and since in the actual game it wasn't even inscribed on the map, if Norman hadn't given him the map he wouldn't have been able to grasp the accurate position of it.
And since Kazuki had been spending all his time on avoiding the flag for the past 3 months, the number of times he had gone out to the town could be counted on the fingers of a single hand. That too, his travel had only been stopping by the temple, and he had never gone even once for shopping or sightseeing.
Rather, it was at the level where he himself wanted to be guided around.

However, Kazuki decided to treat it as a chance.
Kazuki didn't know anything about the town, but it wasn't known whether Harold knew anything about it or not. If there were any places Harold frequented, and if it became that he didn't know about them, it would be suspicious.

But this time, he had the excuse of being restricted to "Showing Erika around the town". It wouldn't be unnatural for him to ask about the town, if he took the stance of wanting to know about

places suitable to guide someone to rather than for his own enjoyment. Thinking that his hypothesis might be correct, Kazuki successfully procured information from the people in the mansion, indirectly.

(Well, it's not like I can make use of it though……..)

From the start, he had no intention to guide Erika properly since he didn't want to raise her affection points. It was just about how he would be able to firmly secure the chance of obtaining information which might become useful in the future.
Even so, this situation was a little off of his anticipation.

「Uh, um Harold-sama……. 」

Erika awkwardly called out to Kazuki (Harold).
She was genuinely confused.

「What? 」

「…….No, it's nothing 」

To Harold's reply, which seemed as though he was fed up, Erika kept quiet without another word. The insides of the carriage was dominated by an awkward atmosphere.
The cause of it was outside the carriage, due to the residents of the town.

She noticed the abnormality when they first got down from the carriage.
No, the atmosphere had probably changed as soon as they had entered the town.

The thing that was there was silence, quiet enough to hurt their ears.
If Kazuki had to pick a situation similar to this from his memories, it came close to the moment when he had frozen up in junior high school, when the guidance counsellor, who was the gym teacher and who was feared by all the students, had found items banned by school regulations spread out in the classroom after school.
And in the gym teacher in this case was Harold.

As soon as Harold's figure appeared, people stopped moving, and when he walked, as though to avoid him, the crowd split. The faces of shopkeepers who were called out became pale due to fear, and the looks of the residents who were examining the situation from afar, were filled with clear hostility.
Anyway, the town wrapped up in a bizarre silence was uncomfortable. That attitude started completely scraping away Kazuki's mental state.

(Neglecting the rumor that I killed Clara became a disadvantage…….)

Regarding that, even Kazuki had thought of doing something. But ensuring the safety of Clara and Colette, and also wanting to avoid the problematic situation of discord rising up with his parents, he couldn't think of any measures which would be effective.
The result was this.

Looking at how much Harold, and also the Stokes house was loathed in front of her own eyes, Erika was also left speechless. Since they didn't know about Erika, it could be said that their reaction was obvious since she was together with Kazuki (Harold). Well, since it would soon be officially announced that Erika was Harold's fiancée, their looks would change to be like the ones from the servants, filled with pity.

That said, if they strolled around the city any more than this, he felt that he would lose more than what he would gain. Mainly, the mental portion.
They had gone around the town for about a little more than an hour, and Kazuki was almost at his limits.

「This is enough already. We're going back」

「……..Alright」

Looking to be somewhat in low spirits, Erika nods. Her face expressed a weariness which wasn't small.
The cause was that she was continuously exposed to the looks containing hostility from the townfolk.

Receiving affection from her parents, and also receiving affection and respect from the people near her and the people of the Sumeragi territory, it was the first time in her life that she experienced being showered with feelings of disgust and hate.
She didn't even think that it would be such a powerful feeling.

Therefore, she didn't even have the will to resist Harold's words.
She chose to head back as she was told.
There were no conversations between the 2 as they went back towards the Stokes' mansion.

「You came back fast ~」

Juno called out to Erika, who had returned very fast.
But she didn't inquire about it.
Because, Juno had been observing the whole time from a different location.
And so, she grasped the general circumstances.

「I had heard that the support for the Stokes house from the populace was low, but I didn't think that it was to such an extent」

In a tired voice, Erika spilled that out.
Speaking honestly, although it was little, she felt that she was in danger.

「Certainly, that type of hate isn't normal ~. Well, as far as the talks are concerned, it is obvious ~」

The talks Juno had heard from the servants and the rumors flowing around in the district were pretty awful. Especially, almost all the profits of the populace was being extorted as tax, and the amount of people who were being made to forcefully work until they could just maintain their livelihood weren't less.
They were even robbed of their energy to cause a revolt, and conversely compared to the nobles with the same level of territory and economic power, the Stokes had huge investments in their military. And due to that, the lives of the populace were becoming even more severe. With this, even if they were to cause a rebellion, it was apparent that they would be dying in vain.

「By the looks of it, it seems as though investigating the internal affairs went well」

「That is, obviously ~」

If the people of the mansion were asked about a single thing, 10 or 20 topics would come back. They seemed to be hated to quite an extent.
But, included within those, was information which couldn't be ignored no matter what.

「It's just that, there's some worrying information ~」

「Information which is worrying, is it?」

「Yes ~」

That was something where she couldn't help but doubt her own ears, and without even thinking she had asked – 「Isn't it some kind of mistake ~?」. But she had gotten enough evidence for her to believe it.
She had some scruples about telling it to Erika, but by doing so, she couldn't ignore the possibility of exposing her to danger, so Juno opened her mouth.

「Actually, it seems recently, Harold-sama burnt a servant and their family to death, using magic ~」

「–Eh?」

Without being able to process the words conveyed by Juno, Erika leaked out her breath in a daze.

「It seems that the people who were killed were a woman named Clara, who was a servant of the mansion, and her daughter, Colette-chan ~」

「W, wait, Juno! Is that the truth? Isn't it just a rumor……」

「There is a possibility of that, but when different people were asked separately, almost identical testimonies were obtained ~. It doesn't seem to be totally unfounded gossip ~」

「Such a……」

Harold's mouth was bad, and even his attitude was oppressive.
Erika herself felt that he looked down on others, held prejudice against them and avoided them himself.
And yet, Harold showed them the hope to save the people of the Sumeragi territory.
Even if he had had his own intentions in doing so, that fact wouldn't shake.

That was why, deep down, Erika had thought that Harold was different from his parents.
To the extent that Juno's words brought about not a small amount of shock. Both of Erika's hands which were covering her mouth, started trembling.

「I'll continue investigating secretly, but refrain from being with Harold-sama alone from now on ~. Since we don't know what might happen ~」

「……..Okay, I'll be careful」

「It's alright Erika-sama ~. I'm here ~」

As though comforting a baby, in a gentle voice, Juno cheered Erika up. As though persuading that as long as she was there, Erika would be absolutely safe.
But still, Erika's quivering didn't stop for a while.

Chapter 12

「How is the cultivation going?」

「I have confirmed that the cultivation is progressing smoothly at all the 6 locations. The harvest amount is also roughly as assumed」

「Then, I want to expand it as soon as possible, but…….」

「Regretfully, if we enlarge the scope of it any more than this, we won't have enough manpower」

「And if it isn't inspected, farmhouses which selfishly start their own cultivation due to being dazzled by the profits will also appear」

It had been 2 weeks since the start of trial run for the implementation of LP farming, and Kazuki, while confirming the results with Norman and Jake, was discussing about the prospects from here on out with them.
The place was obviously Harold's room. Recently, he was seldom alone in the room. Anyone out of Norman, Jake and Zen being in the room became numerous.

「I can't do anything about the deficiency in manpower. Isn't there anybody else in this mansion we can use?」

「It is difficult in the present condition. If we ask Elias or Saxon to cooperate, it will just be a temporary measure…….」

Norman raised up the names of the 2 soldiers who helped in the plan to rescue Clara.
But asking them to go to the agricultural district for inspection on top of their original work, it wasn't very realistic. As Norman himself had stated, it would just become a temporary measure.

「Tsk, then how about I hire people from the outside……?」

「From the outside, is it?」

「For example, if I ask my father that I want personal aides……No, that'll be no good. If it's some guy recommended by father, moving around will become even more harder」

Jake stopped Kazuki (Harold), who seemed to be immersed while murmuring to himself.

「Harold-sama, first I want to continue the report」

「Nn? Ah, the matter about the soil」

「Yes. Regarding the soil of the testing field, no huge changes were observed」

In short, the testing field was the field present in Jake's house. He had been cultivating nothing but the 3 types of vegetable there. The thing he had wanted to confirm was whether problems related to the soil would arise when they did this over a long period of time or when they used a large amount of LP. If due to this, the soil withered away and if it couldn't be used a field for farming anymore, they would need to suspend the use of LP immediately.

「Including this time's, how many rotations has it been?」

「It'll be red groot 7 times, bell tubers 6 times and bluna 11 times. I even had the cooks sample them regularly, but there were no differences in the taste」

「The notice isn't bad, but the number of trials is too less. Continue the cultivation testing and observe the progression. And then……..」

Like this, it became regular for Kazuki to keep them company once in few days and working hard to grasp the current circumstances. Although he did have the sense of fulfillment he hadn't experienced in his student days, even now his future was full of troubles. And since he was using his head in a completely different way from how he used it during classes in high school or university, maybe as a recoil, his body started demanding to go rowdy.

And so, after finishing the discussion, holding the sword, Kazuki carried his legs towards the completely familiar opening in the

forest expanding behind the mansion, which they had used for the plan to rescue Clara.
It was the only place where he could swing the sword with all of his strength.

As soon as Kazuki arrived, he lightly loosened his body and immediately commenced his normal routine.
The 3 hit combo of slashing downwards diagonally from above, cutting upwards, slicing while rotating.

But the sharpness of the swing and the speed of the sword had reached to a level which couldn't be compared to when he had just started training. As though it would slice apart the air itself, a swordplay which would overwhelm those who saw it.
But Kazuki's (Harold's) sword technique didn't stop only at that.

Closing his eyes, he calmed his breath and sharpened his nerves.
It became silent and as though to break it, Kazuki started moving.

Within a second, he had unleashed the 3 hit combo, similar to the one before.The difference was in the next part.
The blade which was swung out due to the rotating slash was clad in –Lightning.

「『Raijin(Thunder God)』」

As though in concurrence with that word, the instant the blade stabbed the ground, a bright electric current was fired.
With Kazuki at the center, 8 streaks of electricity attacked the surroundings. One gouged the ground out, one scorched a rock, one broke a tree trunk.

The reach of the streak was about 3 meters. Kazuki fired an attack which could strike in all the directions, as though it could ignore a numerical disadvantage. But he muttered as though he was dissatisfied.

「It won't even be useful at this level」

The attack Kazuki had fired off a moment ago was called 『Raijin』, one of the elementary level skills in 『Brave Hearts』.

It looked to be quite flashy, and when it had succeeded for the first time, Kazuki himself had been frightened, but in the game it was just a weak skill which consumed 5 MP (Magic Points). It could be guessed that since the protagonist would learn it at level 1, it would be no good.

Then the reason why he was dissatisfied was because, mysteriously a feeling that he could “do much better” sprouted out inside him. That feeling wasn’t necessarily wrong since the number of lightning streaks were 4 at the beginning.
Fundamentally, it was possible for Harold to use magic of all attributes, but among them, lightning symbolized him. And since that Harold’s body was shouting “This still isn’t my best”, as though to answer that appeal, Kazuki was single-mindedly swinging his sword to perfect the ideal Raijin that had crossed his mind.

That was why he hadn’t noticed. That the him right now was ascending to heights which couldn’t possibly be reached by a 10 year old child.
That how extremely abnormal it was.
He hadn’t noticed how he would look from another person’s view.

(This is.., I have seen something serious, haven’t I ~ ?)

As though nothing had changed inside, Juno had a calm expression, but unusually, there was a drop of sweat flowing down her cheek. After reaching a certain point in investigating the Stokes house, when she had set out to seriously investigate Harold, on the first day itself she encountered a scene which made her doubt her own eyes.
After meeting him, I’ve done nothing but doubt my five senses- she leaked out a faint but wry smile.

But she couldn’t just keep on smiling. No matter how she thought about it, Harold wasn’t normal.
He was easily swinging an iron sword whose length was as tall as himself, and that sword speed also wouldn’t lose out to that of an experienced swordsman’s. Adding onto that, he could also handle swordsmanship which used magic.

That itself wouldn’t become a definitive basis to prove anything, but

Juno held the absolute belief that he had a big secret.
The problem was whether that secret had the risk of causing harm to the Sumeragi family and Erika.

According to the plan prepared beforehand, she had thought of contacting him head on, but she felt that it would be better to rework her plan to include some means of feeling around just in case. Thinking that, the instant she turned on her heels, planning to leave without making any sound, that happened.

Behind Juno who had her back towards Harold, 'Gan'- with a heavy shocking sound, the air shook.

(–!?)

To the abrupt situation, Juno reflexively ducked her body.
The identity of the sound was Harold's sword. Right now, it had left its owner's hand and was stabbed deeply into the tree, behind which Juno had hidden her body.
It was a surprise attack which had aimed for the gap in the instant she had switched her consciousness. If the tree hadn't been there, without a doubt, it would have pierced through her.

To that fact, Juno went pale. Even so, the reason she hadn't given out any voice was because of the results of the training and experience she had undergone.
But due the surprise being too much, she had magnificently stamped down the thicket, which was a fatal error.

「Who is it? Don’t keep sneakily hiding and show yourself」

Harold’s sharp voice rang out.
Juno thought of planning to make a getaway as it was, but thinking that there was no way she could fool him, who had accurately seen through her covert action, she gave up and appeared in front of Harold.

Thereupon, Harold’s eyes widened by a small amount, and then, his

expression changed minutely.

(That just now was relief……was it ~?)

To read that change was the power of Juno's unique observing eye. But she didn't know what it meant.

Compared to that, Kazuki was completely flustered.
Since he had been extremely concentrated on practising Raijin, the sword had slipped out of his right hand and flown towards an unexpected direction, and had stopped after stabbing a tree which was more than 10 meters away.
He was surprised because there was some kind of presence there.

Thinking that maybe it had slammed into a person and injured them, panicking greatly, he called out. On the verge of running off in the direction of the thicket, Juno appeared from the shadow of the tree.
From the looks of it, since she didn't appear to be injured, Kazuki was relieved. He had almost become a murderer.

「I'm sorry Harold-sama ~, it was unintentional ~」

While Kazuki was worried about wrenching out words of apology even with Harold's mouth, for some reason Juno lowered her head. It seemed as though she was apologizing for peeking at Kazuki's (Harold's) training. For Kazuki, that didn't matter at all.

「Hanging around in the shadows, insolent. If you don't learn of your position, you'll be injured severely」

If you're going to watch, stay in a position where I can see you. Since if I don't know where you are, I might injure you- not even a bit of Kazuki's concerns were transmitted.
Rather, this was what Juno heard.

(He's giving a warning huh ~……)

Easily grasping her presence, without even offering any room to resist, without taking any action and suppressing her, it was brilliantly done. He wasn't someone who she could take on as an opponent, when there was an existence like Erika near her, who

needed to be protected.
He must have also warned her like this since he understood that.

— That there wouldn't be a next time if she went further than this

It wasn't that she had the intention to relax because Harold was a child. She also wasn't optimistic.
But still, he had easily surpassed her. As though he had seen through everything from the beginning.

It was her complete defeat. Was she really aware that she had fought Harold? He had shown her the difference in ability to even make her feel that question.
He not only had physical power, but was also resourceful.

「Fuh, Well fine. By the way, what is the sheltered girl doing?」
(TL – He calls her hakoirimusume – literally daughter in a box, which basically means that she has been sheltered her whole life and is very naive)

Harold suddenly asked that to Juno, who wasn't replying.
At the abrupt change in the topic, even while being confused, Juno answered the question.

「Erika-sama's body still isn't in a very good condition ~. She might be a bit bewildered by the unfamiliar environment ~」

(Just for her physical condition being poor, 2 weeks is too long. There shouldn't have been a setting of her having a weak condition though…….)

After coming back from going around the town, Erika had told that she wasn't feeling well, and from then on she had confined herself in the room for nearly the whole time and hadn't appeared. Thanks to that, he was fully devoted to the trial implementation of LP farming, but since it was so long, his concern gradually increased. Maybe it's some kind of flag- his crisis perception rang alarm bells. Well, it was already too late though.

「Perhaps, she is homesick. Why don't you go back quickly?」

「You're very cold, aren't you ~? Even though it's temporary, since

she is your fiancee, wouldn't it be fine to be a little gentler ~ ? 」

If he could do that, he wouldn't be so troubled. Harold's mouth was just like cursed equipment.

「 Worthless. As you've said, the relationship between us is temporary. I have no intentions of being bound by such things 」

「 What do you mean ~ ? 」

(Ah, crap. I might have talked a bit too much)

He still couldn't make it known that he had plans to cancel the engagement in future.
The only person who knew about this was Tasuku, who had read the letter. And although it was Kazuki who had written it, even he didn't think that Tasuku would completely believe in it.

That was why, at this stage, if somebody came to know that Harold Stokes himself had the intention of cancelling the engagement, the risks would be too high.
At the present stage, he didn't even have any prospects to prepare the plan.

「 There is no need for me to explain it to you 」

Without even being able to gloss over it decently, spitting out the words of a sore loser, Kazuki went back to the mansion as though running away from Juno.
Although he felt Juno's gaze falling around the back of his head, Kazuki kept ignoring her.

Author's Note-

I think that this kind of development is the classical way of misunderstandings.
Too easy? I don't hear anything.

Various thoughts and opinions were there, but to be frank, since Juno is a character who appeared only because I wanted to do this in the opening, there's not much of a deep setting for having her

hold the unknown device.
And later, she might not come out normally other than for the role of combat instructor.
And that too, the plan is for her to simply play a connecting role.

Next, I'll properly write with Erika playing the main part.
Have to make her evaluation of Harold fall even more!

Chapter 13

Due to Juno's interruption, Kazuki had finished his training faster than planned and since it had come to this, he had spare time. Recently, whenever he had even a little bit of free time, he was putting effort in sword training. He should have started it because he was driven by the necessity when looking at the future, but he had become addicted to the process of acquiring skills by copying the movements in the game.
Maybe due to its adverse effects, other than swinging the sword he didn't have any other means of wasting time. He found this body hateful since he couldn't lightly head out to the town.

Since it was like that, he made up his mind to quietly do some reading once in a while, and picking up a few of the books which were kept in the bookshelf, he started flipping through the books. Among the large number of books similar to children's books, the one that caught Kazuki's eyes was a book related to magic.

Although, the contents weren't technical. The origin of a magic and its progress, a person who had mastered and represented it and also anecdotes related to it- it was a book where all these were written in detail.
The ones which were taken up were grand moves, where each and every one of them were classified as advanced level magic inside the game. While being convinced that it was something like sure-kill techniques popular with children, he continued reading it.

Inside it, he found a name which he had seen before.

Vincent Von Westerfort.
In the original work, he was a heroic figure who at a young age, served as the captain of the chivalric order of the Saint King. He naturally excelled in sword skills, but he also excelled in magic enough to be introduced on par with historical figures like this.
(TL- Changed knight order to chivalric order of the Saint King)

If he had to be expressed in few words, then it was "ultra firepower".
Making use of his abnormally high defense where one wouldn't

think he got it just from the armor he wore, he would break through from the front, and having the highest attacking power among all the characters in the story, to speak of it, suppressing the enemy with pure force was his combat style.
And sadly, in the final stages of the story, Vincent was an enemy character who fights with the protagonist party. Although he wasn't the last boss, his strength was authentic and when the party composition had a weak vanguard or when the healing of the person who played the role of the shield was late, the amount of times they were instantly killed wasn't less.

And unlike Harold, he had gained a high popularity from the players. Thinking over the reason for Vincent standing in front of the party's way and his feelings, 「Even this guy was suffering huh」- almost all the players sympathized with him.
Even Kazuki didn't hate Vincent.

But maybe it was because he had possessed Harold now. Kazuki suddenly imagined a Harold vs. Vincent battle which was impossible in the original work, and he started turning his mind thinking what Harold could do to win.
One had the story's highest firepower, the other was the story's fastest.
If he clashed directly from the front, it would be disadvantageous for Harold. If he directly received Vincent's attacks, he wouldn't last for long.

But just by depending on moving around, if it was Harold who had excellent attack speed and variations, Kazuki thought that he could contend with Vincent.
During the days when it was released, at those times the concept of depth or 3D movement hadn't been used like how it was now and the combat system of 『Brave Hearts』 only had 2D movement like in fighting games. And with that, one not only had to control the main character, but also had to give detailed orders to the party members and importance was placed on how high the combo count one could earn was.
Including Kazuki, if it were the experts, it was possible for them to stably connect 80 combos.

But that was naturally because it would be done by a party

composed of 4 people. Even though the abilities of the enemy character would be set to a high value since it would be a single enemy, Kazuki could easily connect more than 30 combos in hero fights. Especially, once he had launched the enemy into air, as long as the combo wasn't interrupted by the other party members, he would make the enemy into a sandbag until the enemy's life ran out.

That is, for Harold to win against Vincent, he had to keep avoiding attacks somehow or the other, and it would be fine as long as he absolutely didn't drop the combo once he got it in and kept on slicing him up endlessly. Well, if he could do that, no matter who the opponent was, to start with, he would never lose. In other words, if he couldn't do that much, winning against Vincent in a 1-on-1 would be difficult.

Then, how would it be if that character was the opponent- Kazuki started thinking of battles with Harold vs. an impossible someone one after the other. Picturing imaginary battle cards and looking for logical moves to win, this was a way of enjoying it only because he was a deep fan.

Like this, once in a while his thoughts derailed and he ate dinner in the middle, and by the time he finished the book which was about 100 pages, it was already late in the night.
Closing the book with a snap, he lightly sighed. It was quite a worthwhile read.

When he confirmed the time, the date was already changing.
When I wake up tomorrow, I'll search for a book on swordsmanship next. He thought that just before lying down on the bed.
And then, Kazuki finally realized.

(Ah, I came back leaving the sword as it is in the forest……..)

After hastily running away, since he was absorbed in reading as soon as he came back, he had forgotten about it until now.
Juno might have payed some attention and retrieved it, but since she didn't visit after that, the sword might still remain stabbed to the tree even now.

Kazuki came to an understanding that it was obvious that a normal woman who was an attendant would be reluctant to carry a dangerous object like a real sword, which was completely off the mark.
Actually, she couldn't simply walk around the Stokes mansion holding a weapon, but she also couldn't inform the people in the mansion about the whereabouts of the sword since she didn't want to be needlessly suspected about why she was at that kind of place, and so she just left it as it was.

He examined the situation outside from the window. As though to erase the light from a multitude of stars in the night sky, peeking from the breaks in the clouds, the moon was shining brilliantly. The yard, which was illuminated by the moon which was 2 times bigger than the one Kazuki knew of, was bright enough for there to be no problems in walking even without any lights.

Might as well go since I remembered about it- Kazuki raised his back.
That was a real sword, and truthfully it was a lethal weapon. From his senses as a Japanese person, he couldn't calm down if a large lethal weapon was left outdoors and neglected. Much less when that sword's owner was Kazuki (Harold), and if by chance a problem occurred, he didn't want to be held accountable for it.

He passed through the mansion, which had fallen silent since almost all the people were asleep, without making any noise.
He passed through the empty hall, and pushing open the front door which gave off a feeling of dignity, he stepped outside.

Since it was brighter than expected, he was relieved as he thought that it would be fine even inside the forest. Even though the beings which could be called as monsters didn't exist here, considerable amount of courage was necessary to wander around a pitch-black forest.
It would be better to get it over with before the moon was obscured by the clouds.

In a slightly fast pace, he went around the mansion and towards the rear. He approached the flower bed in the southwest, which was in the opposite direction of the cellar. The flower bed was expansive

enough for it to be expressed as a field of flowers. Flowers of various colors were swaying due to a gentle wind.

Kazuki stopped his legs at the appearance of Erika motionlessly gazing at that scene. The first question that came to his mind was – 「Huh, are you alright?」. Even if she had completely recovered by resting for 2 weeks, the air at night would be bad for the body.

This was just genuine concern. An adult being concerned about a child, this was a very obvious and sensible reaction.
That was why he had no hesitation in taking action by calling out to her in the abusive tone as always, wanting to send her back to her room. Without realizing that it would become 1 of the reasons for the collapse of the original story and his own plans.

If time was turned back to this moment with him retaining his memories from the future, Kazuki would absolutely not call out to Erika. He wouldn't have been able to call out to her.
But there was no way such a convenient thing would happen, and it would be a few years from now that Kazuki, looking back at the past, would keenly feel that this might have been the greatest turning point in his life.
But it wasn't now.

「What are you doing, at a time like this?」

At that voice, Erika's thin shoulders trembled. Timidly turning around, Erika winced as she confirmed Harold's figure.
To the reaction which she hadn't made until now, he had a slight sense of discomfort, but without minding much about it, Kazuki closed the distance between them with unfaltering steps.

「I heard that you were staying in bed since you weren't feeling well. And yet, seeing you standing here in the night air, I can't help but think that you're an idiot who doesn't think」

" To go that far, even for me…." was what Kazuki thought.
From here, he didn't continue with a -「I, it's not like I'm worried about you, alright!?」, but as expected, Harold was scum who didn't have even a little bit of naive nature like a tsundere. He had a despicable nature, but that was how he was.

Even Kazuki didn't want Harold to change into a mass produced tsundere.
Even just by imagining it, his hairs stood on end.

「……」

「Don't just keep standing there, return to your room. As for me, I'll feel relieved if you just go back home like that itself」

Even though the words which didn't seem to be very concerned were hurled at her, Erika was still looking downwards without any signs of movement.

「…….Oi, don't simply keep quiet. Speak something」

Towards Harold's mouth which was starting to get irritated, Kazuki felt as though it was someone else's problem. It could also be called as resignation.
Erika was still keeping quiet, but fundamentally, she was a very understanding child. Deciding that if he continued speaking any more than this, he would just be hurting the girl who wasn't offering any resistance, Kazuki finished the talk.

It was probably just that she was very young compared to in the game, and she couldn't be frank in front of a person who held prejudice. She would probably understand what Kazuki was trying to say after Harold leaves and she becomes a bit calm.

「Fuh, Well fine. Even if your condition grows worse, I don't care」

Then why did Kazuki (Harold) go past her after speaking words which would make one want to ask why he even talked to her.
But unexpectedly, Erika stopped him.

「……..Please wait」

「What?」

「I have something that I want to ask about」

Her voice sounded very uneasy, but as though she had resolved herself, she was staring at Harold.

Thinking whether there was any question which made her stop him so spiritedly, Kazuki inwardly tilted his neck.

His doubt was cleared away by the next words she spoke.

「There is a rumor that you burnt a servant to death. Is that true?」

(Ah, it's about that, huh)

Kazuki calmly accepted Erika's question. He wasn't flustered or agitated.

This was because 2 week ago when he had guided Erika, at that time itself he had felt that it would shortly be exposed. Since Kazuki and his parents didn't feel like hiding it. Rather, there were no signs of it not getting exposed.

And from the start, the answer regarding that was already decided.

「No, you're wrong」

「Then……..!」

When Harold clearly denied it, Erika stepped forward with an expression as though she was glad.
The girl, who seemed as though she had discovered a strand of hope, was pushed down to the bottom of hell by Kazuki (Harold).

「I killed the servant and her daughter, the 2 of them. Well, no matter how many people are killed, it doesn't make a difference unless they are people who would be talked about in military stories」

A complete change from joy, as though she had heard something couldn't believe……..no, as though she had heard something didn't want to believe, Erika's eyes widened.

「Why…….? For what reason was such a thing…….. 」

Sadness, rage, despair.
Somehow pushing down the various feelings that were boiling up inside, Erika tried to probe into Harold's true motives.

But the words which came back from him were only those which completely mangled her heart.

「No particular reason. If I had to tell, it's because she got on my nerves」

Harold coolly told that he killed her because he was a bit displeased with her.
Erika didn't understand even in the slightest how he could easily take lives for just a reason like that. As a human, that was a "shouldn't be able to understand" line of thinking.

「Those 2 were nothing more than livestock. Depending on my mood, I can let them live or kill them as I please, right?」

「……Enough already」

「So that the daughter wouldn't be left all alone in the world, I showed mercy and killed them together. Rather, she might be thankful」

「Stop it, please……!」

「After all, they were inferior species. From the moment they were born, something like freedom–」

Pan- a sound rang out.
The cause was Erika's palm and Harold's cheek.
To the statement that discriminated against people who didn't have the blood of nobles, as 『Inferior species』, Erika's patience crossed its limits.

Her hand, which was swung out, was shaking in anger and her eyes, which were shedding tears, were filled with disdain. Glaring at Harold, Erika, for the first time in her life, spoke abusive words.

「You are the worst!」

「So what?」

As though he wasn't enduring at all, he was even wearing the smile

that he always wore that made everyone out to be a fool.
Killing a person, being abused as the worst, as far as he was concerned, all these things didn't matter at all.
Erika realized. That it was impossible to win an argument with this person.

「……..I have nothing else left to speak with you」

「Ha, that is some delightful news」

「Excuse me」

While he was looking at Erika's back as she was growing distant, his left cheek which was slapped started tingling with pain.
Although Kazuki had his reasons for pushing her away, even so, directly getting hit with hostility was a painful thing.

(By no means can you think of it as a "reward")

I'm sorry for one part of the crazy fans, but no matter how you think about it, you must be insane to enjoy this- Kazuki sighed as though he was amazed.
Well, it would be of no help even if he got depressed. It was better than getting slapped by an 18 year old Erika- he forcefully started thinking positively. Since a slap from Erika, who would grow up and experience adventures, wouldn't simply contain only this much strength.

「Don't waver. If you don't get used to this degree, persevering in the future won't be possible」

The mumbling to cheer himself up was carried somewhere by the wind.

Author –
With this, Erika's valuation of Harold is at the bottom

Chapter 14

After that, although Kazuki quietly retrieved the sword and went back to his room, maybe since he was feeling uneasy in his heart, he couldn't sleep.
After turning and tossing over the bed for quite a while, he finally got sleepy when there wasn't much time left for sunrise. Squinting and looking at the sky which was growing lighter, Kazuki thought- a little bit more, and fell into the deep abyss of sleep.

It seemed as though the abyss was very deep, and so by the time Kazuki opened his eyes, it was already past noon.
He got up as though dragging up a heavy body. There was a possibility that yesterday's damage was still remaining.

(Not to the body though)

He patted the cheek slapped by Erika. Physically, there was no pain remaining.
The pain was remaining inside the body, in his conscience.
Even though a night had passed, his heart was pained by the guilt of making a very young girl cry.

That said, even if his mouth tore, there was no way he could have said 「I didn't kill them」. That was not only to protect himself, but also for Erika.

「Fuh, worthless」

Murmuring "Can't be helped" mixed with a sigh- even this whining wasn't allowed by Harold's mouth. If this was Harold's root, Kazuki was in admiration of his mental toughness.
It was also possible that he was simply egotistic.

As soon as he stood up, his stomach which had missed breakfast and dinner indicated his hunger, but to clear his mind which was dull since he had just woken up, he decide to take a shower.
By the way, there was no bath in the Stokes mansion. Because the culture of bathing itself hadn't taken root.

It would soon be 4 months since he had possessed Harold. During

that, the only time he had taken a bath was only when they had stayed the night at the Sumeragi's mansion.
That too, the large public bath which seemed like Japanese cypress baths was installed outdoors and rather than calling it a bath, it was luxurious enough to be called as a hot-spring. He swore in his heart that if he got the chance to once again step into it, he would confirm whether it was a hot-spring or not.

While craving for wanting to enter a bath, Kazuki who had showered stepped towards the dining hall to sate his hunger.
On the way, he met Juno who was walking from the opposite side in a corridor.
She stopped and bowed towards him, but there was no need for Kazuki to expressly talk to Juno who was just an attendant.

But as Erika's crying face flashed in his mind, by the time Kazuki realized it, he was already asking Juno about Erika's condition.

「How's the condition of the girl with the weak constitution?」

Before he knew it, in Harold's view, Erika had undergone a class change from sheltered girl to girl with weak constitution.
This was him being worried about her so it couldn't be helped.

「That is, today her condition has gotten worse ~. As Harold-sama had told, it might be good to consider going back to the Sumeragi territory so that she gets better ~」

Even though what Harold had called Erika was too much, without changing her expression, Juno let it go. Saved by her magnanimity, and thinking when she would get angry already, Kazuki, who was scared, secretly wiped away his cold sweat.
Returning back because of falling ill at the place they were staying at seemed like a waste of time, but since he was running around due to the situation of Erika staying being outside his expectations, for Kazuki he felt that if they returned speedily, it would be a relief. For a reason different from the one for his parents, he didn't want them to know about Clara's case.

「By the way, does Harold-sama know about the cause of Erika-sama falling ill ~?」

「As if. I'm not a doctor」

That was a lie.
He didn't know about the past 2 weeks, but there was no doubt that her condition deteriorating by another level today was due the agitation last night.
Adding to that, it was unknown to Kazuki, but the reason for her falling ill was because of receiving shock after hearing the rumor that Harold had killed Clara and her daughter. In other words, from 1 to 10, Kazuki was the cause.

But if Kazuki knew about that, his conscience might have taken even more damage. Kazuki wasn't a failure of a person who had a personality of being happy by giving a hard time to a girl who was only 10 years old.
With an abnormal situation breaking out in her own territory, her family was running about thinking of how to deal with it even while being exhausted, and yet since there were no results, many of the commoners were suffering, and then as though to grip onto that weakness an engagement was suddenly decided. And the fiancee was a person who didn't even consider people as humans and would easily kill them, the worst kind of scum beyond help. When this was the case, the amount of stress Erika had was quite large.

Considering the environment she left behind and the current state of her mind, it would be cheap getting slapped any number of times was what Kazuki could declare.
In exchange, he wanted to request for her affection points for him to fall to the lowest level.

「That's a pity ~. Since you could create that medicine, I was sure that you were quite knowledgeable in illnesses ~」

Juno indirectly tried to probe. She was very anxious since she still hadn't grasped the origin of that medicine.
Kazuki, completely not realizing her intentions, thinking-「I was thought of like that?」, was surprised at how he was assessed.

「If you're worried, ask your family doctor to examine her. Even if you stay here, it'll simply be needlessly prolonged」

It wouldn't be odd for a family as large as the Sumeragi to have 1 or 2 exclusive doctors. If they were anxious of keeping her in their own territory, it could be settled if they just sent her to a secondary residence or a holiday villa with the doctor tagging along.
Without doing that, since they were hanging on like this, even Kazuki had already perceived that they had some kind of objective. But it was still unknown as to what they were aiming for.

Juno's objective, roughly divided, was to investigate Stokes house's internal affairs and Harold's background. The former wasn't tough, or rather, since the Stokes family was hated, the servants easily opened their mouths, and just by playing the role of the listener to their complaints, she was able to obtain the information that she wanted.
But for the latter, the guard around Harold was abnormally high.

Firstly, since the said person himself was cautious and given that his ability to sense the presence of people was high, she wasn't able to decently approach him. It was to level of seeing through Juno's presence and giving a warning on the very first day of her observation (First Action).
Due to this, Juno couldn't help but change her target.

For that, though she attempted to get in touch with the 3 servants who repeatedly gathered around him, all of them continued to evade her. There was a single instance where Zen, who seemed to be the easiest to take advantage of, let his mouth slip, but still, so far she hadn't been able to get hold of a likely trail.
Even including that he was being careful to not make her feel that something was out of place by just engaging in everyday idle chatter, Juno felt that he was made conscious of thoroughly controlling the amount of information he could give out. The current status was that she was at a loss about how to continue when she wasn't clear whether it was because of loyalty or being threatened or something similar.

(From the report given by the scout division, it seems as though he has been frequenting the agricultural sector ~ ……)

Although she was exchanging information with the scouts who had infiltrated the Stokes house, what he was doing going there was still

not known. Establishing a minority community by gathering individual farmhouses and then having them infiltrate would be difficult.
If they had to do it, it would require a span of few years to arrange for it, and in this case they didn't have that much time for preparations. It could also be said that due to being too hasty, the orders given by Tasuku to have the scouts concentrate in the inner district where the population was high was a mistake.

After that, finishing the conversation after exchanging a few words, Kazuki resumed advancing. The places where one could have food in the mansion were at the dining room used by the Stokes family, the reception hall where they would dine together with the guests, and the general cafeteria exclusive to the servants.
Kazuki headed towards the dining room.

Without even knocking, he rudely opened the door. Since the time had already passed 14:00, his parents couldn't be seen and the maid-clothes wearing girl who always served the meals, was in the middle of changing the tablecloth.
The girl was surprised by Harold suddenly appearing, and then became flustered.

(She isn't able to move due to the fear and confusion)

Fundamentally, the people who knew Harold's face, no matter whether they were men or women, young or old, all of them would be afraid, so he was already used to this kind of reaction. Let alone receiving a shock, he even had the room for observation.
While thinking over it, he sat down in a place where he wouldn't get in her way.

「After finishing that, inform the kitchen to prepare a light meal. And also, call Norman here. Don't tarry」

「Ye, yes!」

Receiving the order, after quickly changing the cloth, the girl left the dining room with flurried steps. The flapping sounds in the hallway got distant.
After that, without even 10 minutes passing by, she came back

carrying the meal. Maybe due to being in the middle of some work, by the time Norman arrived, Kazuki had almost finished eating.

「I'm sorry for being late」

「Sit down and wait」

Tossing the remaining piece of bread into his mouth, barely chewing it, he washed it down with the soup. It was bad manners, but since the only people present were Norman and the maid, he paid it no mind.
Having the maid clear the dishes, Norman spoke when the 2 of them were alone.

「You woke up late today. Maybe the fatigue is piling up?」

「There's no problem. I just had some trouble falling asleep」

「Then, it's fine」

「Well, because of that, I had some time to rack my brain」

Kazuki (Harold) raised the corners of his mouth. Looking at that expression, Norman understood.

「Is it regarding the shortage of personnel?」

「Right. We talked about bringing in people from the outside and having them co-operate, right?」

「Is there a plan we could use?」

「I called you here to confirm whether it wold work or not」

Without going with the classical way of counting sheep, although he thought that he might get sleepy if he started thinking about the solution for something troublesome, against his expectations, without feeling sleepy even for a bit, until dawn he was totally submerged in a sea of speculation.
Though it was worth it since he had thought of something, after all, it was just some shallow thinking of an amateur. Whether it was possible to implement it or not, he wouldn't know the answer until

he asked for Norman and Jake's judgement.

「So, regarding the people co-operating from outside, is it possible to form a contract with merchants based on the rights of LP farming method after showing how beneficial it is?」

Even Kazuki who wasn't very knowledgeable in trade was convinced that harvesting the vegetables of LP farming like this in a cycle, and also the technique itself would yield profits. The cost would be somewhat a bit more than the conventional methods, but the efficiency would increase remarkably.
Due to the difference in the taste, they could aim for that differentiation and it might also be possible to create a new market.

Selling the technique of LP farming to the merchants who would further sell it to farmhouses. The farmhouses would then pay a contract fee to the merchants for utilizing the LP farming method, which would then be divided between the merchants and Harold-was the form of Kazuki's idea.
But at this stage, there was a need to intentionally hold down the volume of harvests, and so that the farmhouses don't oppose against that, if the scope of the company wasn't large enough to send people to inspect regularly, it would be difficult.

Norman, while admiring Kazuki's (Harold's) plan, enquired about the part which bothered him.

「So, do you any leads regarding a company?」

「No. Including that, I wanted to hear Jake's and your opinion」

「With no intermediary, if we suddenly approach a company with the proposal, they wouldn't accept it. If it is an administration by an individual merchant, as expected the manpower wouldn't be enough……」

If it was an intermediary, Harold's parents knew many of them. However, for the proposal to be properly conveyed, they must make the existence of LP farming known, and Kazuki thought that it was still premature for that.

「So, this means that we still haven't found a way to implement it at the present state」

「Unfortunately. But I think that allying with a merchant is a good plan」

「Then, we'll concentrate the talks towards that direction. Convey the plan to Jake too」

「Understood. The problem is how to find a merchant who can be trusted」

After that, the 2 people talked about this and that, but the discussion didn't progress any further.

◇

While making rattling sounds, the carriage following the path between the crop fields passed through the gates of the mansion. Exchanging light chatter with the soldiers who were standing guard at the gates, the coachman who came in was Zen, with a carefree smile plastered on his face.
Zen, who had finished shopping for some items, unloaded the luggage and after returning the cart to its assigned position, he went towards Harold's room. If Kazuki (Harold) had seen that, 「Just like a mongrel dependent on its owner」 - he would've made a fool out of him by telling that.

But the person himself, who seemed as though he wouldn't even mind that poisonous tongue, walked with a pace as though he had gotten used to it, until he came in front of the door and though he knocked on it, strictly ordered to do so by the owner of the room recently, to check whether he was present inside, there was no answer.

「Harold-sama? Are you there?」

If it were a normal servant, they would have left with this, but Zen, who was peerless in acting overly-familiar with Harold, opened the door and peeked inside.
Even though he knew it, it was empty as expected.

Thinking of coming back later since if he wasn't here at this time, it meant that he was practising swordsmanship, he caught sight of a small figure standing in the hallway.
From looking at the small figure which seemed to be dispirited, without being able to bear it, Zen strained himself to speak out in a cheerful voice.

「Hello, Erika-sama」

Turning around with sluggish movements, as though noticing Zen's existence only due to that voice, Erika widened her eyes by a little.

「Good day. You are……」

「Ah, I am called Zen. What happened to Juno-san?」

Seeing Erika alone which was unusual, he asked that question. No way, maybe she got into an argument and is dispirited- he guessed wildly, but it was completely off the mark.

「She is going towards the town for some personal business」

If told without concealing, she had left to exchange information with the aforementioned scout division. Since she had just left for today, she wouldn't be back for another 1 ~ 2 hours.
Though, she couldn't tell that.

「So it was like that. And so, why are you here…… maybe, do you have some business with Harold-sama?」

Since she was near the room, it wasn't unreasonable for Zen to think like that. But the instant Harold's name came up, Erika's expression clouded up even more.
Right now, he was the person she wanted to meet the least.

But Erika suddenly realized that the person standing in front of her held no hostility towards Harold.
Maybe he didn't know about that rumor. When she thought like that, Erika reflexively asked Zen about it.

「Don't you know?」

「Err…., regarding what?」

「That Harold-sama killed a servant by using magic」

「Re, regarding that, how should I say it…….」

This time, it was Zen's turn to be shaken.
Seeing that reaction, Erika was convinced that he knew about Harold's brutality. And simultaneously, a question bubbled up.
Even after knowing knowing it, how could he still deal with Harold.
She thought that he was just putting up a front, but from the hesitation in his words, it seemed as though he didn't feel any fear or hate towards Harold, but a kind of frustration of wanting to support him but not being able to was oozing out.

「Aah……..although I have heard that kind of plausible rumor being spread about in public, it can't be confirmed whether it is really true or not and since its authenticity isn't definite, I'm hesitant to ask Harold-sama……」

「Harold-sama confirmed that that rumor was true. In the first place, since the one who was killed was a person working here, even you should know that it is the truth, right?」

「Uhh……」

It was as Erika had told. Zen had dug his own grave with his incoherent explanation and was at a loss for words.
Frankly speaking, Zen wasn't eloquent enough to turn around the situation by creating a smokescreen and confusing her.

Norman had chosen him because he was good-natured, that is to say, because he was a person who could understand Harold's real feelings and become an ally.
But it wasn't as though his good-natured character would only manifest in front of Harold. Erika right now was depressed enough to stimulate his softhearted nature.

「And yet, why do you……..No, by doing what could one follow Harold-sama like you do?」

Those words which were spoken out in a grave voice seemed as

though it was a supplication while also being a question.
No matter what his nature was, for the sake of the Sumeragi family, Erika had to marry Harold. Her will which couldn't pardon him was an obstacle.

Although she understood it, wavering between her responsibility and emotions, Erika didn't know how to convince herself.

From the time she was aware of her standing, she had given up on things like love and marriage. Knowing that the person she was going to be engaged to belonged to a house which supported the pure-blood principle, and that they were oppressing their populace, she was filled with rage.
But still, Harold gave hope to the Sumeragi who were suffering.
But in the end, even he didn't think of people who didn't have noble blood, as people.

If it could be said that she got her hopes and then despaired at her own convenience, then that was it. She had no words to return.
But the reality that the thread of hope extended in the complete darkness was just an illusion, was more than enough to push down Erika to the bottom of despair.
Even while being crushed in the gap between duty and emotions, and yet trying to earnestly grope around for the exit, Erika's appearance was too heartless.

But Zen knew. That the despair she was drowning in was an illusion that was intentionally created.
Surely, the world that was waiting for her was very kind.

Because there was no way that he, who was being hated and scorned, and had even resolved to shoulder the sin of being called a "murderer" to save 2 lives, would just abandon Erika like this.
And it could also be thought of like this.
For the sake of her family and the people, the girl who was trying to kill her own emotions was also, like Harold, a person who had strength and kindness.

Even while being young and carrying a heavy burden, Harold and Erika were trying to stick true to their own wills. It was way of living which was very clumsy and where they would always run

into walls.
These 2 who were very similar shouldn't just pass one another, instead they should face each other and expose the real themselves (feelings). The other party was the one and only person they could do that with.

「Erika-sama, can you come with me?」

That was why, even though the unreliable adult (himself) had poor ability, if he could support them, then even if he incurred Harold's displeasure or even if he was abandoned, he wouldn't mind it.

「Just a little bit, please give me your time. There is a matter that I want you to listen to」

Author –

For the time being, the plan is to have the misunderstanding regarding Harold completely solved next time.

Chapter 15

Erika was awed by his look of strong determination. She didn't know what Zen's real intentions were when he spoke out those words.
Without any basis and just by her intuition, Erika felt that if she refused his offer, then sooner or later, she would deeply regret it. She was spurred on by an uneasiness similar to a compelling feeling.

「Understood. Which way should we proceed in?」

「This way」

To lead her to that place, Zen turned on his heels and with firm footsteps, he stopped in front of a certain room.
Zen chose it as a fitting place for talking about the truth. That was–

「Here!」

Harold's room.

「…….Eh?」

At the development which was outside her expectations, she involuntarily leaked out a stupid voice. Erika was so confused that she didn't even have the composure to be embarrassed about it. From the flow of the talk, she thought that he would reveal some kind of circumstances regarding the murder of the servant that Harold was hiding, that is to say, Harold's secret.

What did it mean by doing that it in the room of the person who had wanted to expressly hide it. Maybe, she had fatally misunderstood something in her conversation with Zen.
But where in the world, what kind of misunderstanding was it?-
Erika's mind was in complete chaos.

「Now now, go on」

「Eh? Ah, hey…….」

While she wasn't on guard due to her confusion, Zen pushed Erika's small back and stepped inside the room. He didn't hesitate at all since he had already confirmed that Harold wasn't present.
Zen looked around the room restlessly, and when his eyes fell on the closet, he opened it and pushed Erika, who couldn't keep up with the situation, inside it.

「Sorry! Please wait here for some time!」

Closing the closet, Zen tried to run out of the room.

「Eeh……..?」

Once again, a voice which couldn't be though of as her's leaked out from Erika. She was a guest of the owner, and that too when she was a person who had the position of the fiancee, locking her up in this kind of place had already surpassed the level of being disrespectful. If it were some other person, they would even go as far as killing him.

Fortunately, Erika wouldn't choose to express her anger in such a severe manner, but still normally thinking, she couldn't not offer some complaints about this kind of treatment. But this wasn't the time for that. Before anything else, she must give the highest priority to getting out of this room.

From Erika's viewpoint, although it was completely against her will, she was still an intruder. If this was exposed, she didn't know what Harold would spout out.
Thinking of following after Zen, the moment she put her hand on the closet door, cruelly, a 'gacha' sound reached Erika's ears.

「Owaa!」

Subsequently, Zen's surprised shout reached her. With a timing when he was just about to open the door, since the owner of the room returned, it wasn't unreasonable for him to be surprised.
Hearing his shout, Harold frowned.

「Don't give out an annoying voice. Or rather, what are you doing in my room?」

「Uh, umm ~ …….. Actually, I needed to inform you about something, Harold-sama, but even though I knocked on the door, since there was no reply I peeked inside the room」

「If there's no answer, leave obediently. How much of an idiot are you」

Erika peeped through the gap between the blinds furnished inside the closet and observed the situation. She had completely lost the chance to escape.
If she came out here and explained, she could still make some excuse. But what would happen to Zen?

Harold was a person who would kill someone just because he didn't like them. Even though it could be said that Zen reaped what he sowed, she wanted to avoid getting him killed.
But it wasn't known whether Harold would listen to Erika's pleas to spare his life. Judging from his behavior, she thought that the possibility was low.

(What should I do……..?)

While Erika was trying to make a decision, the situation was rapidly growing worse.

「So, about the thing I wanted to tell!」

Zen forcefully returned back to the topic. To that, sighing as though he was exasperated, Harold sat down on the sofa.
And against Erika's expectations, Harold urged Zen to continue speaking.

「What is it? Keep it short」

「Ee, it's extremely difficult to say this, but that rumor has spread quite far……. 」

Zen was being ambiguous with his words by calling it that rumor, but to the people present, it was obvious as to what it was.

「Just now, when I had gone to buy goods from the town, in the shop where I stopped by, the shopkeeper and the customers

altogether were persistently questioning me」

「……..」

Harold crossed his arms and with his eyes closed, he just kept listening to Zen.
Even Erika, who was inside the closet, didn't understand what he wanted to say, so she listened closely.

「Although it hasn't been revealed, and precisely because of that, Harold-sama's reputation will fall to the ground, and I feel that it'll be bad is we don't take any measures…….」

「And here I was thinking of what you might say, worthless. Hasn't such a thing already fallen down and completely smeared with mud」

「But……..」

「But, What? Do you want to announce that "Clara and Colette have run away to the Brosch village and are still living"?」

「No way! Even if I die, I won't speak of that truth」

(–Eh?)

Listening to their exchange, Erika's mind became completely white.
What did Harold say? The servant and her daughter, Clara and Colette are still alive?
What did Zen say? That is the truth?

The shock she received exceeded last night's acknowledgement of the murder. Erika, whose thoughts and body were frozen over, could do nothing but listen to the 2 of them talking.

「Then don't think of meaningless things. If by chance my parents find out that they are still alive, I'll be under suspicion. To thoroughly eliminate that possibility, it's already a determined matter」

「Although I know that, at least how about telling Erika-sama the truth? Due to believing in that rumor, it seems as though she's very depressed」

「Absolutely not」

A clear refusal.
If the temperature of his voice could be measured, without a doubt, it would be below freezing point. Zen and Erika's muscles froze in an instant.

「…….Why?」

Zen couldn't help but ask.
Why did Harold reject Erika to that extent. That was because, for Harold, in this world of 『Brave Hearts』, in a way he thought that the one he must be the most cautious about was Erika.

The main feature of the character called Erika was kindness. But before that "the way of living" was included.
In the original work, Harold thought that he was a special existence and he was lump of consciousness that believed himself to be the chosen one by thinking that no matter what was done to other people, it would be allowed. That was why he could unconcernedly kill a servant, discriminate and oppress the powerless populace, and could even make a town into a complete sea of fire as a sacrifice for the monsters just so that he could continue to live.
He had all these atrocious deeds piled up, and yet Erika, even while hating Harold, without giving up, continued to suffer by staying as his fiancee.

The reason for that was because she was felt a sense of obligation since the Stokes family had provided financial aid. Normally thinking about it, due to the connection with the Stokes, their family would get scorned at and there was even the danger of the Stokes pulling their legs, but as expected, that was just to enliven

Erika's event, for the convenience of the game's scenario.
And so, there was a fear that the kindness due to the setting would stick through with the idiocy and bare its fangs against Harold from here on.

Firstly, as the main premise, Harold's objective was to survive without dying. The things he thought that were necessary for this was avoiding death flags and clearing the original work's scenario. There was no need to explain the former. Then the reason for the latter was, if for example, in the case the last boss wasn't defeated, then almost all the people of the continent including Harold would die.
Although it wasn't confirmed, by guessing from the information inside the game, that possibility was exceedingly high. At any rate, if the rampage of the last boss isn't stopped, then the only continent in the world would sink- was how it went.

In other words, even if he avoided the death flags, if the last boss wasn't defeated because of deviating too much from the original work, there would be no meaning in it.
There was a need for the protagonists to clear the scenario by any means possible, and inside the protagonist party, Erika held an important position of being the healer. With her presence or absence, the quest's difficulty level would change. Since their survival rate would be greatly influenced, even for Harold's sake, it was absolutely necessary for Erika to become friends with the protagonist and if that didn't happen it would be troubling.

Moreover, he had a faint hope that if the scenario was cleared like the original work, he might be able to return to his original world. Or rather, he couldn't think of anything other than that with regards to returning back to the original world.

Returning back to the topic, what would happen if Erika, who couldn't abandon Harold until the last moment, learnt common sense and general conscience, and on top of that saw Harold extending a hand to the Sumeragi when they were in a predicament.
It was a hypothesis he didn't want to imagine. She might actively push for the engagement. Well, that would still be fine.
But if because of that, she didn't join with the protagonist, what

would happen. That was the situation that Harold was afraid of.

That was why, other than not walking the evil path for avoiding death flags, Harold judged that the the risks would be lower if he got hated by Erika thoroughly in everything other than that part. It would even be fine to declare- Let her affection points eat shit.

How easy it would be if he could explain it like that, but the drawback would be that they would suspect the condition of his head. He decided to just make up some appropriate reason and stop Zen's questioning.
Breaking the long silence, Harold started talking.

「……She was crying」

「Eh?」

「I don't know if it was because of the truth that I killed a person, or if it was for the mother and daughter who were killed. But no matter for what, her heart was pained for some stranger and she shed tears. She's nothing but an idiot」

He recalled last night's memories. Illuminated by the moonlight, there was single line of tear firmly traced on Erika's cheek.
Though she was caring to the extent which couldn't be helped, that was certainly Erika's virtue.

「And simultaneously, she is too kind. That too, a kindness which only sympathizes with the other person, a weak person's kindness. If such a person tries to walk with me, she'll bear an innumerable amount of wounds」

「That's why, you're purposely distancing yourself from her? Thinking for Erika-sama's sake……」

「Don't spout nonsense. Why would I need to think for her sake. I'm just saying that cancelling the marriage to a troublesome girl, who cries for each and every little thing, is what even I wish for」

Harold's words pierced Erika's heart very deeply. It was very sharp, but it was a completely different pain compared to last night's.

Pangs of conscience, self-hate, regret.
Negative emotions came out successively and tried to swallow Erika. The wave of emotions and Harold's words didn't stop.

「Such…….Eh, Harold-sama has no intention of marrying Erika-sama?」

「There's no way I'll have any」

「Then why did talks of engagement…….」

「To put it simply so that even your brain can understand, this is an engagement bought by money」

The Stokes family, who wanted their lineage, took advantage of the Sumeragi, whose revenue was in a considerably unfavorable condition since the proceeds from forestry, which was the linchpin of their economy, became low because of the unnatural outbreak of miasma in the forest.
Since the unnatural outbreak of miasma was a calamity which had no precedents in the whole continent, it wasn't known whether the Sumeragi would be able to recover, and also repay the money they had borrowed. Among the royalty and other nobles who were hesitating whether or not to provide large-scale financial aid due to these various reasons, the engagement was the result of the Stokes family going to sell a favor without even thinking about the consequences.

After coming to know the motives and circumstances of both the families, Zen noticed a certain thing.

「Then, for the Sumeragi, won't cancelling the engagement be fatal?」

Certainly, as Zen said, if the Sumeragi lost the financial aid by Harold unilaterally cancelling the engagement, then in the near future, the Sumeragi territory wouldn't be able to maintain itself.
Well, even if Harold threw a tantrum, there was no way that his parents who were obsessed with lineage would allow to cancel the engagement.
But Harold had no intentions of trifling with that.

「I've already made a move. The medicine and LP farming are for the sake of that」

In the regions where pollution due to the miasma was weak, by using that medicine they would be able to lumber wood like always. Until the protagonist disperses the accumulated miasma, it would gradually extend its range, but putting it in another way, it shouldn't extend more than it had done in the game.
Even in the letter to Tasuku, he had dug up the game's map from his memories and had informed him about the expected maximum range of pollution. If they could predict the maximum range of damage beforehand, even the Sumeragi could pull back their defense line.

Adding onto that, he also had the intention of offering the know-how of LP farming. Although, since the outlook still hadn't been good, in the letter he had stopped by writing some dubious statement like- 「I'm even considering offering some knowledge about industrial techniques」.
Receiving the explanation which left out the parts of the information about the game, Zen expressed as though he was dumbfounded.

「You have even thought about such things……. 」

This was the first time he had heard about the medicine and the letter, and knowing that there was such an intention hidden behind LP farming, Zen could do nothing other than be wonder-struck.
How far into the future was this boy gazing at.
And Zen wasn't the only one to be surprised. Even Erika, who was holding her breath, was shocked by Harold's foresight and depth of thinking.

Harold had sensed the danger towards the Sumeragi in advance. That too, before the talks of engagement had come out, immediately after the outbreak of miasma. If thought of it like that, then she could understand how he was able to gather the information about the ingredients required to make the medicine even without a few days passing by after the engagement was decided.

In other words, this meant that Harold had tried all possible means for the sake of saving the Sumeragi who should have been completely unrelated to him. Although he was insisting that he had done it for selling a favor, if the money, time and effort spent until the medicine was created, was put on scales, then the merit of saving the Sumeragi would be too less. All the more when considering Harold, who seemed to be for the pure blood principle from the way he talked.
Thinking about that dedication and his thoughts, Erika's vision blurred.

Honestly, even Harold had made this decision only after thinking over it for a long time.
It was clear that if Erika knew he was giving them this much support, then her sense of obligation would be much more than that in the original work. Then the reason why he took actions which weren't in the game was because he wanted a patron.

In the place where the Stokes couple's eyes could reach, he wouldn't be able to move freely and he would also be unable to have his way with gathering people who could act for him.
And there, he thought of making contact with the Sumeragi with the cover of a fiance. He had thought that he could trust Tasuku, since he knew Tasuku's personality from the game. He had compassion, was understanding and also had personal connections, and if Kazuki could gain his cooperation, it would become easy to support the protagonists from the shadows.

By offering the medicine, industrial cooling down could be delayed, LP farming could bolster the economy and if the protagonist took care of the miasma accumulation event, even forestry could be restored. If that happened, even without the financial aid of the Stokes, the problem of managing their territory would disappear, and if Erika's engagement was cancelled, they wouldn't receive a serious blow. Moreover, regarding the cancellation, Harold himself had informed in that letter that it would be fine to do it.

(Exactly like a "debt" parade on the scale of Kazoe Yakuman*. Although that salesmanship feeling of pressure isn't half-assed, as long as I don't have any unreasonable requests, Tasuku should cooperate in most of the things)

(TL – *A term in Rīchi(Japanese) Mahjong about which I have no idea of. I think it means the person who has that gets a high amount of points, maybe. You can look it up here. If anybody has a thorough understanding of it, please explain in the comments)

That wasn't confidence but conviction.
However, he had a single concern. That concern which might be classified as an "unreasonable request" was connected to Zen who was in front of him, so he unintentionally warned him.

「Right, after that think about your future also」

「What do you mean by that?」

Harold who had adjusted his voice so that it couldn't be heard from outside, reduced it even more. It was to the level that Erika, hidden in the closet, was barely able to catch it.

「I've told it before, but in the near future, there is a danger that the Stokes family will fall. If you don't want to become jobless, it'll be prudent for you to be prepared just in case」

「But aren't you spreading LP farming to prevent that?」

「If nothing is done about the current taxation and wasting of money, it'll just be to the degree of an extension. Even I'll think of something, but it might not succeed. I have no intention of helping you bastards, so do something by yourself」

Even the always happy-go-lucky Zen lost his composure at this. Harold who was talking about it as though it was natural, was the one who was weird.

「If that happens, what will happen to the people of the Stokes territory?」

「Who knows. But if it is Tasuku Sumeragi, he won't do anything bad to them」

He spoke in a slovenly manner. But a name which Erika couldn't let slide rose up.

(Why is father's name being used here…….?)

「Err……What do you mean?」

「In the letter, I have appealed to the Sumeragi side to not deal with the populace unjustly when the Stokes family falls. Really, I can't help but laugh at their weakness since they wouldn't survive if something like this isn't done」

Even if he told appeal, it didn't mean that he asked for the Sumeragi to provide for them. If it were the Sumeragi who were close to the royalty, the people could expect some influence and support from them.
It could also be said that since Kazuki didn't know whether Tasuku would accept this "request", he sold an excessive amount of favors.

(Most probably, it'll become the territory of another noble, and I pray that a person more decent than the one now comes)

Although, by that time, he wouldn't be there in this land. He was completely ready to throw away everything to the successor.

「Anyways, that's how it is. If you break the ban by telling it to others, you won't simply get away with it」

「I, I understand. I haven't told it to anybody, alright…….?」

Pierced by the sharp glint in Harold's, Zen's voice quavered. That there was another reason for his voice quavering, and Zen's roundabout way of telling- 「I haven't told anyone」, Kazuki didn't notice it at this time. Well, even if he noticed the existence of his nemesis (Erika) hidden in the closet, it was already too late.

Author –

Kazuki, Harold, Kazuki (Harold) – since many complaints have come out that 3 representations is confusing, I have chosen to use only Harold.

It's painful for Zen to be called incompetent.
It's my fault though.

Chapter 16

「Is that all? If you're done, get out immediately」

「Though I really want to do that ~ ……Ah, Harold-sama, what will you do now?」

「What is it, all of a sudden. There's no need to tell you」

「Well, I was thinking whether or not you will practice swordsmanship today」

Looking at Zen's suspicious behavior, where his eyes was moving around restlessly, inwardly, Harold tilted his neck.
Certainly, while he was chatting with Zen, since the food in his stomach had also been digested, he had thought of going to the usual place to practice his technique, but that should have had no relation to Zen.

「What about it?」

「I've kept it a secret until now, but actually I'm interested in swordsmanship! That's why, I was thinking of maybe going to see Harold-sama wielding the sword」

He unintentionally wanted to retort- Then, change your main job to a soldier. It was just that Harold's physical abilities were high and he was just an amateur, it would be impertinent to call it self-taught style with his level of skill.
A while ago, since he was doubtful of his skill, Harold had requested the soldiers to spar with him, but maybe due to being afraid of injuring him, all of them stuck to only defending and none of them even tried to attack him properly.

It was obvious if he thought about their standing, but for Harold, not having a personal practicing partner was a problem.
He thought about maybe asking his parents, but it was those 2, who were partial towards Harold, that would arrange for an instructor.
He was doubtful whether he could learn the swordsmanship used in real battles, which was what he wanted.
Thinking that he would think about that part little by little, he

deemed that it was alright since he had found a practice partner for today.

「Then I'll show it to you, from a special seat」

「Umm, Harold-sama? Why are you holding 2 swords? Though I'm interested, it doesn't mean that I have experience, alright? Suddenly asking to become an opponent is a bit……」

「Don't talk back」

「P, please, give me a break!」

As he was dragged away by his nape, Zen's shouts were fading away. Soon, when she couldn't hear any voice or footsteps, Erika got out of Harold's room when it became silent.
Luckily, she hadn't been spotted by anybody, but even when she had returned back to the room given to her, she couldn't sort out her emotions which were completely mixed up.

She was pondering over the words which Harold himself had spoken out.

The servant whom she had thought was killed, was still alive.
And while guiding them, to give the highest priority towards their safety, he had suffered dishonor.
He had also wanted to purposely get himself hated by his fiancee, Erika.
And yet, he wanted to do something to save Erika and the Sumeragi.

Naturally, she didn't believe that all of this was the truth. She was also aware that Harold and Zen might have prepared that exchange beforehand.
But still, at the same time, there were parts which were convincing. Especially, his attitude which seemed to fan Erika's hostility towards himself, and his behavior which showed hints that he had started working on the medicine from a few years back.

What was true and what was false, how to approach Harold- Erika could no longer find out the answers for these. Even her own

feelings about what she wanted to do were obscure.
It felt as though she were wandering around inside a thick fog without any aim. The one who roused her consciousness was Juno, who had come back after completing her errands.

「Erika-sama, are you there ~?」

Following a light knock, her usually slow voice was heard from the other side of the door.
With that, Erika's heart calmed down by a bit.

「…….Yes, it's fine to come in」

「Excuse me ~」

She was wearing the same cooking outfit as always. That outfit which didn't change no matter what the time, now felt as though it was very reassuring.
Juno easily sensed these subtle changes in Erika's heart.

「Did something happen while I was away ~?」

Although it was in the form of a question, Juno was convinced that something had happened to Erika. And she intuitively discerned that it had something to do with Harold.
At Juno's sharpness, Erika's body stiffened up.

She hesitated whether or not to tell about everything she had heard to Juno without holding anything back.

If the contents of what Harold had talked about were true, so as to not make light of Harold's consideration, she should keep silent. Since Harold had gone as far as to get dishonored to protect the servant and her daughter's safety.

But as a person from the Sumeragi, there was a need to judge the authenticity regarding this no matter what. Even for the sake of making sure what kind of person Harold was.

「–Juno, please listen」

After worrying over it, Erika decided to tell Juno. Of course, not the

whole story.
Only the minimum information about how Zen had pushed her inside Harold's room, and then had talked about how the 2 people who were rumored to be dead were still alive.
Although she had omitted quite a lot of it, the subject were more than enough to make Juno raise her eyebrows.

「That's why, I want it to be investigated whether Clara and Colette are really alive or not」

「Understood ~. I'll immediately make the arrangements ~」

Although Juno had just returned from the town, she once again went back. Since Juno herself couldn't move very far from the mansion, she had to request the scouts to go and investigate in the Brosch village.
And even as she was going to the town, Juno was continued to think. Listening to Erika, Juno had felt a big sense of discomfort.

(Would a thing like Harold-sama not noticing a third party hiding in the room even happen ~?)

Harold was powerful enough to easily sense the presence of Juno, whose livelihood was spying. Was it even possible that such a person would overlook Erika, who didn't even have the ability to kill her presence.
The answer that Juno deduced was a no.

The possibility that Harold had intentionally leaked this information to Erika, that is, to the Sumeragi side, was quite high. Why he had leaked the information, which was concealed from the people around him, to the Sumeragi, even she was unable to grasp his real motives for doing this.
If that were the case, then right now, she was moving as Harold would want her to. When she thought like that, Juno was bitterly regretting it.

(At that age, he makes one feel bottomless dread ~. If he were to grow up, what kind of ingenious scheme would he come up with ~)

She didn't know whether to anticipate or fear that future figure. If he became an ally, there wouldn't be many people who would be as reliable as him.
Not only was he resourceful, at that age, he had even learnt the sword. Even the word prodigy would be thought of as too lukewarm.

But if in case they became enemies, undoubtedly, he would be a formidable one. To the extent that if he were to be killed while he was young, they could reduce their future losses remarkably.
He could become a big enough threat for them to think like that.

Regarding Harold's behavior, it couldn't be helped that Juno had given such a judgement.
It couldn't be called unchildish. Putting adults to shame- even that wasn't enough.
It it was only to that level, there was no way he could lightly toy around with Juno and move around without Tasuku seeing through his true motives .

Even if that wasn't what Harold himself had aimed for, it could be said that it was inevitable that the other party would perceive it as such.
And Harold's biggest mistake was manipulating the degree of affection and due to being too desperate to adhere to the original work, he had neglected his own assessment from the surroundings.
Even though he himself understood that his behavior deviated from children within his age group, but to be mindful of it and acting prudently just because of that, he had no leeway with either time or mind or manpower.

In a way, it was a very probable situation.
But if here, he had become properly aware of how he was assessed and what it meant to be thought of like that, he could have avoided stepping into predicaments due to being unprepared. If he had thought of wanting to avoid this kind of development, he could have.

And also, it was fatal for him to not investigate Erika and Juno's aim even though he felt that their very abrupt long-term stay was inexplicable.

If an explanation was needed, then this was due to the negligence Harold brought upon himself, exactly because he knew that in the original work, Erika hated injustice and going around the truth. He had never thought even in the least bit that she or her attendant would act like spies.
If he had paid close attention to Erika and Juno's movements, if he were to become aware that the information about Clara and her daughter being alive had gotten out, at the very least, the possibility of the situation falling into this state would have been low.

As a result of magnificently ignoring all these various factors, Harold would foolishly choose the move of heading to the Sumeragi territory once again out of his own will.
The start of it was when close to 3 weeks had passed from when Erika had come to learn of Clara's survival, that is, when about a month had passed since Erika had started staying in the Stokes mansion. It was a command given out by Harold's father, Hayden.

「I should go to the Sumeragi house?」

Like the other day, after Hayden had asked Harold to come to his study, the subject he talked in a serious manner was about how he wanted Harold to escort Erika, who wasn't feeling well, back to the Sumeragi, and how this time, he wanted Harold to stay over at their place to deepen their relations.
The former was just a front while he was aiming for the latter. Hayden thought her bad health was just to the level of her being homesick.

「That's right. Because I can't go this time. But it's necessary for the sake of showing good faith」

(Good faith, is it? Most likely, he just wants to appeal to the surroundings that the relationship between me and Erika is favorable by making me accompany her……..)

It had already been officially announced in the Stokes territory that Erika was Harold's fiancee. Due to that, sure enough, the emotions of the people towards Erika shifted to pity.
He couldn't help but be amazed at how his popularity in his own

house was non-existent. He had no confidence to change it to a positive assessment.

「Understood. Then it should be fine to make preparations for the departure as soon as possible」

「Hahaha, to think that you would be so worried. It seems as though unknowingly, you have become surprisingly intimate」

Obviously, that wasn't the case. In the first place, since Erika had secluded herself inside the room for the whole time, he had no chance to get close to her, but it seemed as though Hayden interpreted it to something which was convenient for him. Although he wanted to remark sarcastically about how naive his thinking was, since there was no way that this annoying mouth which feigned obedience in front of his parents would ever allow it, Harold, with Hayden laughing in a good mood in his peripheral vision, treated this visit to the Sumeragi house as a chance. Shall I wager on a match here- he was eager about it inwardly.

Although he was impatient inside, that was a very rash decision. It might also be that he became conceited because he had found a clue to solve the situation even when there was still a pile of problems.
That is to say, it was like stepping on the greatest landmine. He should have been more calmer before taking action.

Even such basics had been forgotten by Harold at this time. He still didn't know that due to his actions he would invite a new death flag.

Chapter 17

And so, when it was hurriedly decided that he would visit the Sumeragi, on that same night, Harold explained fairly well about the policy they would follow from then on to Norman and the others, and made the preparations required for a long term stay. After that, he left the Stokes mansion a few days later, and a week from then, he arrived at the Sumeragi territory where the cherry-blossoms were in full bloom.

The cherry-blossoms Harold knew of couldn't be in the state of full bloom for a whole month, but it seemed as though that wasn't the case in this world. It must be that "Cherry-blossoms" and "Cherry-blossoms" were just similar but not the same.[1]
While thinking about that, Harold was sitting in seiza[2] on the cushion laid on the room of tatami mats, and was gazing at the pink flowers swaying in the wind.

It had been about 30 minutes. While putting into practice the method which he had learned in his previous world of sitting in seiza so as not to let his legs become numb, Harold was waiting for Tasuku to finish his official tasks, while sipping on some green tea[3] once in a while.

「Harold-kun, how about another cup of tea?」

「……..Make it a bit more stronger this time. The aroma is thin and above all, it's tepid」

With the desk in between, sitting diagonally opposite from Harold, Tasuku's wife, Koyomi, as though she was a maid, waited until Harold's teacup was empty and extended her hand towards an iron kettle being heated up in a small hearth of about 40 cm^2 beside the table.
Contrary to how completely grateful he was inside, Harold's mouth which didn't know any fear, gave an order. Well, it was true that although the tea was good, it was lukewarm and on top of that in contrast to the sweetness of the traditional snacks[4] to go with the tea, the diluted tea felt a bit unsatisfactory.
Nevertheless, there was no need to spit out such words.

「Ara, then this time, I'll make the tea a bit more stronger and hotter」

「Do that」

It seemed as though polite speech was activated not in front of his elders but only in front of his parents. But even towards Harold's haughty attitude, Koyomi's gentle smile didn't break down, and with experienced movements, she poured hot water from the iron kettle into a small teapot and steeped the tea.
Though this digressed, Harold didn't know that for good quality, that is, to steep high grade green tea[5], it would be the best to use somewhat hot water with a temperature of 70 degrees.

Inside the room, where the aroma of tea leaves was wafting around, Harold was sipping on green tea while gazing at the cherry-blossoms. The only sounds that entered his ears were the whispers of grass being swayed by the wind and the 'kakon' sound made by the bamboo of the bamboo fountain hitting the rock in a periodic manner.
It was a refined moment as though Japan's aesthetic sense of quiet simplicity and subdued refinement[6] was crammed into it.

(Aah, I'm being healed……..)

For Harold who was a Japanese person inside, this was a reception of the highest grade. It was also large that, to Harold who had always been working either his mind or body since the moment he had come to this world, this was the first time a healing tranquility had appeared.
Moved by this moment which could also be called as a time of supreme bliss- It wouldn't be bad to just live in the Sumeragi house- with this tempting thought, he raised his neck.

Koyomi was gazing at Harold, who had closed his eyes and was breathing slowly, with a smile, but also with some interest. The thing which pulled her interest was the conduct with which Harold had entered the room.
As far as Koyomi knew, the only place in this country which knew about the culture of seiza was the Sumeragi territory.

From his previous visit, she had understood that Harold was acquainted with the culture of the Sumeragi to some extent.
But removing shoes and changing into inner-footwear at the entrance, sitting in seiza for a long period, eating food using chopsticks- Even if one knew beforehand about all these customs and cultural practices unique to the Sumeragi, it was a different matter of whether or not they would be able to actually conduct themselves like that.

Normally, even if one knew about it, there would be some point where they would hesitate, but Harold, without any difficulty, that too as though it were habitual, did these things naturally. As expected, that he would have his own preferred taste and even temperature of green tea, was outside her expectations.
It wasn't that he knew about the Sumeragi's culture. He had experienced it.

(But where?)

It was hard to think that he had experienced it in the Stokes mansion. The head, Hayden, was almost completely ignorant about these things.
If there was a person who was from the Sumeragi near Harold, she didn't know what it meant for only Harold to be taught manners and not Hayden.
Anyway, he was boy who had many inexplicable points about him.

Maybe due to that, Koyomi unconsciously started observing Harold's actions.
As a result, the room was completely silent. Well, since neither of them found it painful, there was no need to worry. They spent another 10 minutes peacefully like this, and then, the tapping sounds of someone walking in the hallway started getting closer.

「Sorry for making you wait. Work was prolonged, you see」

From the other side of the sliding door which was left open, Tasuku showed himself. Maybe due to feeling sorry for making Harold wait, there was an awkward smile on his face.

「Like always, it seems as though you don't know what to do」

「Even though it appears like that, it has become considerably better. It's thanks to the resistance drug created by Harold-kun. I'm truly grateful. Thank you」

No sooner had Tasuku sat on the cushion than he lowered his head. Koyomi also followed him.
Harold was taken aback at the abrupt event.

「Raise your head. It's unsightly. I didn't do it to be thanked by you bastards」

「I can't afford to do that. I don't know what you were thinking for making a move, but still, it's an unshakeable truth that the situation changed for the better thanks to you」

That's why, there is no way that I can't not show my gratitude as the head of the Sumeragi house- so as to not make that known to Harold, Tasuku stared into Harold's eyes with a bright expression. Unable to bear it, Harold moved his line of sight.

「Fuh, worthless. To have no choice but to lower your head to a child like me, be ashamed at your own incompetence」

「I have no words to return. Well, as far as I'm concerned, I'm happy to have met a youth like you whose future will be full of expectations」

「Is that so. Then wag your tail and cooperate with me」

「…….That is the reason you requested to speak to me? Aren't you being a bit too hasty by abruptly jumping straight to the main point without any introduction?」

「I have no intention to engage in gauging each other's hand. Read this first」

Carefully produced by Norman and Jake, it was the latest version of the document which consolidated the effects and application of LP farming that were proven at the present point of time. He placed it on the desk.
Urged by Harold's gaze which asked him to "read", Tasuku took it in his hands.

And as he kept turning the pages, the seriousness in Tasuku's face continued to increase. That reaction was as Harold had expected. Or rather, if it wasn't like that, he would be troubled. First of all, it was necessary that Tasuku understood the extraordinary worth of LP farming.
That was the premise upon which the negotiations this time would be held.

Tasuku, who was reading the document thoroughly as though he

was eating it, after reading the last page, sighed lightly and closed the document.

「How to say it…….The contents are crazy」

「Right? But it's the truth」

「So, it's within your expectations that I would be doubtful?」

「Doubtful? How about frankly telling me "I don't believe it "?」

Daring. That one word was more than enough to describe Harold who was snickering with the corners of his mouth raised.
Looking at it from another way, it meant that he had that much confidence. If, for example, this were a bluff, then he was quite an actor.

However, he had past results. With regards to the miasma which broke out in the forests inside the Sumeragi territory, he had offered the method to produce the resistance drug free of charge. Due to that, the hope to reconstruct the management of the Sumeragi territory became visible when they had been cornered.

「…….To just assert and finish it like that is your dreadfulness. Because, even with the content being this preposterous, you make me think of wanting to listen to your talk」

「Even if it's the truth or lies, the listening part is free」

「Certainly. But just by showing this document to me, it's a huge harvest for me though」

「If you want such a thing, I'll give it to you. After all, it's just a copy」

Looking at Harold just cutting and throwing it away as though it didn't matter at all, although it was inside, Tasuku was shaken for the first time.
In this document which informed about an original crop cultivation method called LP farming, the details as well as the volume of information was huge and had been consolidated in a very good manner. The process itself was easy and the risks were low. It

would be easy to implement it.
If he discontinued the negotiation here with -「As expected, I don't believe it」, he could obtain the possibility of earning profits without any losses to the Sumeragi.

Even though it was like that, Harold had given him the initiative to lead the negotiations. This meant that Harold thought of LP farming itself as nothing more than an opening act for the real issue.

(Since I realized this possibility, I can no longer pull back, huh)

To be exact, the risk would increase if he pulled back. Having the Sumeragi test whether LP farming had any defect might be the situation he was aiming for.
Or, even if there were no tangible damage, he might negotiate with some other place and there was the danger that they might suffer at a later date.
To prevent that, as expected, he had to listen to the main topic Harold would talk about here and try to read his true motives as much as possible.

If even this thought process was induced, then it isn't to the extent of him being just formidable- lamented Tasuku.
From the report delivered from Juno, Tasuku was informed that Harold wasn't someone's puppet, and the possibility of him acting due to his own will was high. After confronting him like this and exchanging words, he was convinced that it was the truth.
It was impossible to manipulate a person to such an advanced degree by influencing their thoughts or brainwashing them.

「Then, let me take up your offer」

「Do that. Or rather, if it isn't like that the negotiation can't continue」

「Fumu, what does that mean?」

「Assuming that everything written in that document is true, what do you think?」

To Harold's question, Tasuku answered a beat later.

「It's a ground-breaking invention. After implementing it and increasing the harvest, if no particular problems occur, to start with, a production system can be prepared in this territory. And after a certain degree of predominance is secured, I would let it spread around the whole country」

「You won't monopolize it?」

「If a limited amount of people monopolize resources, it would trigger disputes in the future. Because I think that even I haven't become dumb enough to fall so low as to be surrounded by enemies due to jumping at the profits in the near future」

「…….Fine then, you pass」

From Harold who was familiar with Tasuku's personality, it was the ideal answer. Holding down the impulse of wanting to retort 「Who the hell do you think you are」 to himself, he continued the negotiations.

「Even I roughly share your opinion. It is fine to profit from LP farming, but being seen as an enemy from the surrounding masses is irritating. And so, I came to make a proposal」

「By all means, I'd like to hear it」

As both their lines of sight intersected, instantly the atmosphere of the room became strained.
And once again, Harold pasted that fearless, bird of prey like smile on his face.

「I'll have you become the joint developer of LP farming」

TL –
1. 1st cherry-blossom(sakura) is in kanji(桜) and the 2nd one is in katakana(サクラ).
2. seiza is the traditional way of sitting in japan- kneeling with the tops of the feet flat on the floor and sitting on the soles. Can I use seizaing from now on?
3. ryokucha- The most common tea in Japan is ryokucha.

4. wagashi- Traditional Japanese confections served with tea.
5. gyokuro- Literally “jade dew” is a type of shaded green tea(ryokucha) in Japan.
6.wabisabi- represents Japanese aesthetics and a Japanese world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Chapter 18

That proposal took Tasuku completely by surprise. There was no need to even talk about the reason.
Since Tasuku had no part in the development of LP farming at all.

「What do you mean? I haven't been involved in the development at all though……」

「Only until now. But from here on out, for spreading out LP farming we'll use the Sumeragi's name」

From his words, Tasuku remembered something. Within Juno's report, there was information that "his behavior in front of his parents is different".
He had thought of it as just the difference between his behavior in front of his relatives and others, but a single possibility went across his mind.

It was that Harold might be hiding his own ability from his parents.
If they had known about his capability, they would have tried to show his appeal much more when they had first come to decide on the engagement.
Adding onto that, Harold himself had hinted at the fall of the Stokes house in the letter. That meant……

「Harold-kun doesn't think of it as a good plan for your parents to know about LP farming?」

「As expected, I well understand my parents' personality」

If they knew about LP farming, in all probability it would advance towards the development that Tasuku feared. Harold was convinced of it.
That was why, he had come here like this to ask for the Sumeragi's cooperation.

「Moreover, I don't have enough pawns. If I increase the trial farmhouses any more than this, I won't be able to monitor them」

「I see」

He understood what Harold was trying to say here.
He wanted to enlarge this operation without letting his parents become aware of it. For that sake, there were limits if he continued as it was.
Since it was such a ground-breaking method, there was a need to control its management completely so as to prevent any information leaks. And to do so, since the human resources he could gather wasn't enough he had brought this proposal to the Sumeragi.

「But why to my side? If there were this much profits, I think that anybody would jump at it」

「It was just that with the conditions I wanted fulfilled, you were the easiest one to cooperate with」

This was a bluff. If Tasuku shook his head horizontally, Harold would be in a predicament since he had no other intermediaries. But since he understood Tasuku's personality and knew about his weakpoint, he would use his a certain thing as leverage.

「If you refuse, I just need to reach out to the 2nd or the 3rd candidate. Well, that won't be necessary though」

「You think that I would absolutely accept this proposal?」

「Right, you have no choice but to do that」

Absolute confidence no matter what. What was it that made him think like that. Tasuku didn't think he would just come here with a strong stance without any basis. Rather, he seemed as though he would use logic to cut off the opponent's path of retreat beforehand.

(Wait, block the path of retreat? No way……..!)

An unpleasant bead of sweat rolled down Tasuku's cheek.
Due to a sudden flash of insight, he connected together the scattered pieces and formed an answer. As soon as he reached that answer, chills to the extent of freezing his spine ran through Tasuku.

「You realized?」

That voice which carried an ominous sharpness as though it were the scythe of the Death God, struck Tasuku's ears.

「…….Were you anticipating this situation from the beginning?」

「So what? Would it change your answer?」

Tasuku closed his eyes. Like Harold said, his answer wouldn't change.
In any case, since Erika had been put on the scales, he could do nothing other than agree.

「So, this was what 『Offering industrial techniques』 informed in the letter meant, huh……」

Tasuku dropped his shoulders and muttered. The reason was Erika's engagement annulment.

His daughter had accepted a restrained future out of responsibility, and they weren't her true feelings. Harold himself had suggested in the letter that he didn't mind even if it was annulled.
The conditions to accept it were- to compound the the resistance drug and to improve the condition of infected patients by using it, to quarantine the estimated maximum pollution area of the miasma, and also to restore their economic power by implementing the offered industrial techniques.

At that time, he had thought of it as just some nonsense or coercion of a 3rd party.
But if it became that all the contents of that letter were written by this boy, then the situation would be different. Not as a head of the family, but as a father, those terms were extremely attractive.
That there were no disadvantageous parts in Harold's proposal also backed his decision.

He might have intentionally written the letter in a manner which didn't suit his age, like an adult. By doing so Harold had insinuated that there was a mastermind, and since Tasuku had entertained that suspicion, he hadn't even reached the possibility that Harold himself might have written the letter. Even though he had received

the report from Juno.
In other words, from the time Tasuku had received that letter, he had done nothing more than move around on Harold's palm. To bring out this situation, from how long had he been acting.
In front of the preparations which seemed as though Harold had predicted the future, he was in utter shock.

「Certainly, it's attractive enough to jump at it spontaneously…….But what is the reason for you to care about the Sumeragi to such an extent?」

If he had just wanted to increase his intimacy with the Sumeragi, then the things he had already offered were more than enough. And moreover, there was no way he would want to annul the engagement which was the firmest connection.
Without being able to read Harold's intentions, Tasuku's confusion only intensified.

But that was natural. Harold was only moving for the sake of thoroughly evading his death flags which would fall in the future, and from the people who didn't know about this, reading his intentions was almost impossible.
Even if he were to explain, there was no way Tasuku would understand, and he also didn't have any intention of explaining.

「Even if I tell it to you, it's not like you would…….No, it's something that nobody other than me could understand」

That tone seemed like self-depreciation. Looking at Harold, who was fearless until now, taking that kind of attitude, Tasuku was at a loss for words.
As though waiting for that unguarded moment, Harold pressed for an answer.

「So, what will you do? If you say that you can't trust me, then this negotiation is over」

Certainly, if asked whether Harold was trustworthy, he still wouldn't be able agree.
But it wasn't definite that his goal would harm the Sumeragi, and if Tasuku were to accept this proposal, the Sumeragi house, their

populace and even Erika's future could be saved.

If said in other words, Harold was going so far to do this. Even this matter, if Tasuku was made to forcibly accept it, it would be almost impossible for him to raise an objection.
Even though Harold was in a position that was overwhelmingly advantageous for him, to the end he just brought the discussion over in the form of a proposal.

Although it looked like Tasuku had no choice to refuse, that was wrong. If he closed his eyes off thinking of Erika's engagement as a sacrifice, refusing would be possible. If that happened, the connection between the Stokes house and the Sumeragi house would become unshakeable, and even without LP farming they could just receive financial aid from the Stokes as agreed upon before.

Or rather, with this proposal Harold was the one who had to take a risk. And that too, normally thinking it was a risk he didn't need to take.
It was easily imaginable that he had invested a considerable amount of time and money on developing the resistance drug. Even though he had done that much, with there being the danger of the situation coming to nothing, he had left the decision to Tasuku in the end.

(It's not easy to do this……..)

He honestly thought that. Was made to think like that.
If he thought about it carefully, Harold was moving so that there weren't any losses to the Sumeragi.

Normally, if one was brought such a convenient proposal, nobody would easily accept. They would doubt the other party, investigate for suspicious points, and if their doubt wasn't cleared, they would refuse. Even Harold's proposal was like that.
That decision as a result would link to the possibility of simply letting go of the profit which they could have obtained.

But Harold had expressly prepared a rationalization like "Erika's engagement could be annulled". So that it would be easy for Tasuku to accept the proposal. Although it seemed that it was thought of as

being over interpreted as good will, nothing else could explain why Harold hadn't broken down the appearances of a discussion to the extent of bearing unnecessary risks.

(Even though it could be that he is using this train of thought, in that case, opposing wouldn't help. No matter what, it's my complete defeat)

Tasuku slowly exhaled the large breath he had taken in. He raised his head which was bent downwards, and gazed firmly at Harold's eyes.

「I accept this time's proposal」

That was Tasuku's answer.

「Although it was predetermined, well I'll praise you for your prompt decision. In a few days, prepare some of the people who work under you and the fields owned by the Sumeragi. To start with, I'll drive into them the know how of LP farming」

「Will only that much be fine?」

「After that, according to my estimation in a few years a large scale company will be necessary. One which keeps information confidential and which can be trusted. I'll leave that judgement to you」

「I see. After solidifying the foundation, we'll co-operate with the company and increase the number of fields which can be managed and later on, sell the technique through the company, right?」

「It seems like you have a better head than my pawns」

Though he was condescending, inwardly Harold was astonished at how good Tasuku's conjecture was. Since he had obtained a very reliable colleague, Harold was completely satisfied. Even if he wanted to sell the technique, he wanted to borrow the Sumeragi's name to hide it from his parents- he was sure that Tasuku would read this intention of his even without telling him.

「Anything else that is required?」

「And…….」

When he was about to say it, Harold closed his mouth. He hesitated thinking whether it would be right to say it at this timing.
Sensing that, Tasuku extended a hand in complete good will.

「If there is something, I want you to request without holding back. If Harold-kun wants it, as much as possible I'll try to help you」

「……Then prepare for a strong fellow. While I'm staying here I'll accumulate one-on-one combat experience as much as possible」

To survive in this world, inter-personal combat strength was absolutely necessary. To obtain that which couldn't be obtained in the Stokes' mansion, Harold resolved himself and took a step forward.

Chapter 19

The evening of the day on which Harold and Tasuku confirmed their cooperative relationship.
The veil of darkness had descended and within the darkness where moonlight didn't reach the ground due to heavy clouds, as though to run away from that darkness there was a single room within which a bright light was burning.
In that room, starting with Tasuku in the chief seat, his wife Koyomi and daughter Erika, personal attendant Kiryuu, and with the cooking outfit, on which there was not the least bit of dirt, as her trademark, Juno, were all silently sitting.
As though to loosen the tension, the head of the mansion, Tasuku, started talking.

「Well then, It seems like you have some report. Juno?」

「Yes. There's something that I have to inform Master and also Erika-sama about」

Although she spoke in a calm voice, it wasn't in her usual slow manner of speaking.

「Even Erika?」

「Indeed. Since I was moving under the orders of Erika-sama」

With those words, all gazes other than Juno's gathered on Erika. Receiving that, she lowered her head deeply.

「I'm sorry for mobilizing them on my own, Father. But there was something that I absolutely needed to confirm so I ended up borrowing Juno's strength」

「Something you absolutely needed to confirm, means something regarding Harold-kun?」

「That's right. Father, are you aware of the rumor that Harold-sama killed a servant and her daughter?」

「Yes, a report that some rumors like that were floating around the

streets of the Stokes territory did come」

Even the scouts, who had disguised themselves as traders and travelers to infiltrate into the Stokes territory, had heard about the matter of how the mother and daughter were killed. Maybe because, since before there was hatred towards the Stokes family among the populace it was quite widespread.

「…….The possibility that it was untrue came up」

「False? In other words, the 2 who were killed in the rumors are still alive?」

「To ascertain the truth, I had Juno and the others cooperate with me」

And now, Juno was here to report the results of the investigation. This time, everybody's eyes were on Juno. All of them were waiting for her next words.
Towards that, Juno didn't try to put on any airs and started talking.

「Regarding this time's affair, the rumors being circulated are wrong. The servant Clara and her daughter Colette who should have been killed are still alive」

To that report, Tasuku narrowed his eyes and Erika bent her head down and strongly clenched her fists, which were on top of her knees. She was attacked by feelings of guilt.
While looking at her as though she was worried about her, Juno continued her report.

「Currently, the 2 of them are living in a small village called Brosch village which is under the jurisdiction of Viscount Ballack. Although it was quite difficult, I was able to obtain testimony from the person herself」

「What do you mean by difficult?」

「Since they hadn't changed their names, it was easy to find them from asking the villagers, but she stubbornly refused to talk about what had happened during that time」

Receiving that report from her colleagues who had gone there before her, Juno headed towards the village herself. When she personally tried talking to Clara, it wasn't to the extent of turning her away at the door, but it seemed as though Clara had no intention to talk about the real situation.
But it also wasn't as though Juno could simply back away with 「Then it can't be helped ~」. And while exchanging words with Clara, she realized about a certain thing.

It was that Clara felt a huge amount of gratitude towards Harold. While insisting that he had personally killed the 2 of them, Harold had covered up their survival, and even while knowing that there were rumors of him killing them, he gave no signs of wanting to stop these rumors. Adding onto that, it was unknown as to why the person who was supposed to be killed was feeling a sense of gratitude towards Harold.

When she thought until there, Juno formed a certain hypothesis. In the case that the hypothesis was true, she had a good idea to shake Clara.
And simultaneously, it was something that would trample all over Harold and Clara's feelings.

But even if that happened, Juno didn't have the choice to hold her tongue. Stifling the bitter feelings, she continued on.

『Harold-sama is taking on the dishonor as a murderer and is continuing while affirming it. Due to that, the populace are being hostile towards him, and although it isn't being shown on the surface, Harold-sama was becoming extremely haggard.
I don't have any intention to expose the hidden truth under broad daylight. But if you talk about the truth, Harold-sama would be able to gain a sympathizer behind the scenes. Please provide some assistance by thinking of it as helping him』

Those imploring words which were exaggerated here and there were instantly effective. When Clara heard Juno's words, her face became ghastly pale and she covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes filled with tears and after a few minutes of agonizing silence passed, she finally told Juno everything that had happened on that day clearly.

And she regretted. That she could do nothing other than talk due to being compelled.

「…….What did she say?」

「It seems that it all began about 5 months ago, when Clara almost injured Harold-sama by mistake」

From there, Juno conveyed everything that she had heard from Clara accurately without any excess or deficiency to everybody in the room.

With that as the impetus, Harold's parents had gotten enraged and had almost killed her.
Harold had lied to them by telling them that he would experiment with magic on her and had then locked her up in the dungeon.
And while buying some time, he had devised a plan to save Clara.
So that the daughter wouldn't be left all alone, he had put them together.
He had prepared for a large amount of money, a carriage and household goods and provided it to them free of charge.
He had been taking on the dishonor even until now was most probably to ensure their safety.

「……..She talked about it while in tears」

Listening to Juno's report, all of them were at a loss for words.
Behind that arrogant attitude, Harold was very strong and kind, and at the same time it was because he knew about the suffering that he had done this.
And Clara who knew about that, even though it was for the sake of saving him, must have felt pain as though her body was being cut since she had talked about the truth ignoring his feelings.

Erika stood up abruptly and extended her hand towards the sliding door. Tasuku stopped her by asking her.

「Erika, where do you plan to go?」

「…….No matter what, I have to apologize to Harold-sama.
Without knowing anything, without even trying to know, I cursed

at him just based on my emotions, and moreover I even raised my hand. Although it's something that can't possibly be pardoned, but still at least…….」

It wouldn't do if she didn't apologize in all sincerity.
But those thoughts were obstructed by Tasuku.

「That isn't acceptable」

「Why?」

「He's doing this much, putting everything on the line, to protect them. Now that we've come to know about it, the behavior we should choose isn't sharing the secret but to scrupulously adhere to the secret. If he comes to know that there has been information leakage to the other party, when we still can't completely trust each other, we're talking about Harold-kun, he'll become cautious of more leakage and become even more solitary than he is now」

If that happened, there was a danger of Harold who had been fighting alone so far being driven into even more solitude. Though it seemed that Harold would do something even then, even so it was thorny path.
Under that thick mask, he might have been hurt an innumerable amount of times, and at times he might have also cried.

「It is obvious that Erika wants to apologize. But is that really coming due to being aware that you have wronged him? Can you declare that you just don't want forgiveness for the cruel treatment?」

「!」

That was why Tasuku stopped her. Even if he had to say some unreasonable and harsh words to his own daughter.
Erika also understood what Tasuku was trying to say. In her head at least, she understood it. But her heart, her emotions couldn't be put in order by reason.

「…….Then what should I do? What do you want me to do when I can't even correct my mistake, when I can't even apologize!?」

Erika's figure which was screaming like that suited a little child's, where she was acting her age. Towards Erika, who was normally more mature than required, but who was showing this childish behavior now, although he was aware that it was extremely inappropriate, Tasuku smiled pleasantly.
Standing up quietly, Tasuku went towards Erika, and gently stroked Erika's head which was around the height of his abdomen.

「Become a person who can support Harold-kun. He is exceptional, but he is too excellent. Sometimes that strength will isolate him」

Exchanging words with Harold, Tasuku instinctively perceived a certain thing. Most probably, Harold was looking at the world with a different point of view from his, or rather from a normal human's. If that wasn't the case, the words "It's something that nobody other than me can understand" wouldn't have come out.

When he said that in a somewhat lamenting manner, he must have understood his own future that Tasuku had been worried about. But fortunately or unfortunately, Harold also had the strength to endure that solitude.
If it were him, no matter how precipitous the path, he would continue to walk on. Tasuku felt that strong will from Harold.

「If you are thinking of wanting to repent for your actions, don't beg for forgiveness, but whatever he's trying to accomplish, watch over, support, get closer to him and try to become a person who truly understands him」

「Getting closer to Harold-sama, becoming a person who can truly understand him……..」

「That would be something very difficult to do. Because of how exceptional Harold-kun is, although he might want colleagues, he might not need friends. Can Erika accompany him, who can perform many things alone, and trust his arbitrary judgement?」

Above all, it was obvious that Harold himself was trying to push Erika away. Tasuku didn't think that he would take such an attitude without any reason.
He might have such a reason to do that towards Erika.

That is, no matter how much Erika tried to devote herself to him, there might not be anything rewarding. And that again would be walking on a harsh path.

「……」

And Erika wasn't immature enough to assert with a 「Yes!」 like a child with naive thinking. This was because, how much her own actions were self-centered, and how different it was from the ideal form that Tasuku talked about, she understood it so well that it was painful.
Bending over and matching his eyes with Erika, who was gnawing at her lips as though she was mortified, Tasuku admonished her in a kind voice overflowing with affection.

「There's no need for you to give an answer immediately. It's fine for you to decide what you want to do by learning from his figure. Well, I do think that you have to apologize that you went too far for raising your hand against him」

He sent Erika, who appeared to be dispirited, back to her room after she uttered a 「Yes…….」 in a tiny voice. He decide that even if he said anything more today, she wouldn't be able to organize her emotions.
After Erika left the room with Juno following her, Tasuku smiled wryly.

「When the engagement was decided, she was considerably depressed, but this time too it's the same」

「But the reason is completely opposite though」

Compared to him, Koyomi chuckled in a voice like tinkling bells.
Just 2 months before, although Erika was behaving firmly, towards an engagement with a person she didn't wish for, inwardly she was feeling dispirited.
But now, she felt regret at hurting the said person, and even had thoughts of wanting to be recognized by him. Although, it seemed as though she herself still wasn't aware of that feeling.

「Children continue to mature like this……」

「What are you saying so seriously? Shouldn't this be the first time you have personally experienced our child's growth」

「It is especially so if it's the feelings concerning your own daughter. By the way, Kiryuu, what was Itsuki's reply?」

「It seems that he'll be back by tomorrow morning」

Towards Kiryuu's words, who had refrained from speaking and was silent for a long time, Tasuku again smiled wryly.

「Well it's about him. I knew he would say that」

「Since that child loves Erika. Even if it's training, wouldn't it be too much to make Harold-kun fight against him?」

「It'll probably be fine. From Juno's report, it seems like Harold-kun is quite skilled. It shouldn't become one-sided」

Nonetheless, even Tasuku didn't think that Itsuki would lose. Anyway, those 2 clashing will be quite amusing- that sudden impulse which had a touch of youth flashed across his face.

「You're making a bad face, dear」

「Unthinkable. It's just that my heart is dancing looking at children who have a bright future」

「Master is also still youthful, is it?」

「Ha ha, no mistake」

「Haa, no matter how old, boys will be boys」

Koyomi felt exasperated and sighed at Tasuku and Kiryuu nodding and grinning.
Harold, who wasn't even aware that the adults were talking about these things, was satisfied that things went well even though there were some unexpected situations, and savoring the feeling of the futon which he hadn't felt in a long time, he went to sleep.

And then, the next morning.

With a cold expression, Harold, who didn't seem to be in a good mood even in the slightest, had breakfast together with Tasuku, Koyomi and Erika. And this happened after they had finished breakfast.

「That's right, Harold-kun. About yesterday's matter, I've prepared a fitting opponent for you」

While drinking green tea after the meal, Tasuku said so. At those words, Harold frowned.

「You act quite quickly even though I mentioned it just yesterday」

「It's just that by some chance a strong person was nearby. As soon I asked about the bout, he immediately acknowledged」

「Who the hell is it?」

「That is an enjoyment that will have to wait until you meet him. He just came back this morning, but how about sparring right away?」

「Naturally. You've prepared the place, right?」

Without being able to suppress his impatience, Harold stuck on. Looking at that appearance, Tasuku deepened his smile.

「Obviously. We'll travel in the carriage so can you make your preparations?」

No sooner had Tasuku finished speaking, than Harold left his seat and returned back to his room. Japanese clothing[1] — because it would be hard to fight in clothes like yukata[2] given in Japanese inns[3], he went to change.

「Even yesterday, but Harold-kun is fine with sitting in seiza」

「Even without listening to the servant's explanation, he wore Japanese clothing. The way to use chopsticks and wearing garments too, it seems that his knowledge regarding the Sumeragi culture is quite deep」

「……..Come to think of it, he knew about the cherry-blossoms too」

The Sumeragi family gazed at Harold's empty seat in wonder. A few minutes later, Harold's figure with his usual outfit was present in the carriage. The ones who were riding with him were Tasuku and Kiryuu, and for some reason Erika too.

Erika who was sitting next to Harold seemed to feeling extremely awkward. Harold also understood that feeling well.
There was no mistake that she hated this. Most probably, Tasuku had some kind of plan.
Reasoning it out like that, Harold didn't unnecessarily open his mouth and continued to be rocked by the carriage.

After a while, the place they arrived at was a huge arena[4]. The first thing that came into his sight after he got down from the carriage was a 10 meter entrance. It gave off an imposing air, and when he entered into the grounds after passing through the entrance, in the huge space there were various facilities lined up, and from here and there he could hear shouts and 'don' sounds as though hitting the floor even without straining his ears.

Among these, the one Harold was led to was a dojo which had an especially stately atmosphere and it had 2 storeys.
Similar to its appearance, they climbed up the wooden stairs attached outside and entered the dojo through the front door established in the 2nd floor.

With light from the sun flowing through the grid patterned windows, that floor didn't feel gloomy and was like a rest area. In one corner, many adults were laying out the tatami mats which were placed horizontally and taking up some space.
The instant Tasuku and Erika entered the rest area which was clamoring and overflowing with energy, it became silent and in the next moment, everybody lowered their heads and took a posture of bowing.

「Sorry for visiting all of a sudden. I'll be borrowing the lower dojo for a bit. Has Itsuki come?」

「Yes. I saw him this morning」

Tasuku talked to the people inside the dojo in a familiar manner, and the adults who were addressed also answered as though they idolized him. Their relationship of trust was apparent.
While looking at that scene, with Kiryuu in the lead, Harold and the others followed after him and descended to the 1st floor.

There was a kendo[5] hall present on that floor. There were 2 match courts, and the ceiling wasn't present.
There were spectator seats present on the 2nd floor, and maybe due to Tasuku visiting or something, the number of people who were peeking on the situation on the 1st floor started becoming more and more.

But for Harold, those spectators were trivial. His eyes were already glued to a certain point.
There was single boy swinging his shinai[6] in the middle of the kendo hall. He was older than Harold, maybe around 12 or 13 years old, and he was silently repeating practice swings. With that itself, he had the power to draw one's gaze.

「Itsuki」

When Tasuku called out his name, the boy stopped his practice swings and turned towards them.
He had black hair and eyes like a pure Japanese person. He was about 10 cm taller than Harold, and with his refreshing and handsome features, he could live as an idol even in Harold's original world.

The stunning pretty boy[7] Itsuki, said this as soon as he opened his mouth.

「Ooo, Erika! In the short amount of time I haven't seen you, you've become even more beautiful!」

Ignoring Tasuku, he rushed to Erika in a straight line, and gripping her hands, he earnestly started praising her. Erika turned eyes which seemed as though she was embarrassed, towards Itsuki.

「……..Oi, don't tell me, this guy is my opponent?」

「Although I know what you want to say, his strength is real. Relax」

「I was sure that I told you to "arrange for a strong guy". No matter how you look at it, he's just a kid」

「Even you're one, right?」

Nothing except Erika in his sight- although that was how Itsuki appeared to be, it seemed as though he had properly spared some of his consciousness towards Harold too. Completely different from the one towards Erika, with a somewhat dark smile, he turned towards Harold.

「First, let me introduce myself. I'm Itsuki Sumeragi, Erika's elder brother」

「……Harold Stokes」

「That's it? That's not it, right? Aren't you omitting the most important part」

With a plop, Itsuki placed his hand on Harold's left shoulder.

「You're Erika's fiance, right? My! Prideworthy!! Sister's!!!」

While feeling his shoulder being gripped tightly by Itsuki's right hand, Harold realized.
That this guy, without a doubt had a heavy sister complex.

Author –

I couldn't include the fight.
Sorry.

TL –
1. Wasou – Traditional Japanese clothes like kimono and yukata.
2. Yukata – Japanese garment worn by both men and women,

although there are some differences. It's like a casual summer kimono.
3. Ryokan – It is a type of traditional Japanese inn that originated in the Edo period.
4. Budokan – It is a training facility that houses a number of arts sharing a similar culture origin or perspective.
5. Kendo – a Japanese form of fencing with two-handed bamboo swords, originally developed as a safe form of sword training for samurai.
6. Shinai – a weapon used for practice and competition in kendo representing a Japanese sword.
7. Bishounen – Japanese term literally meaning "beautiful youth (boy)" and describes an aesthetic that can be found in disparate areas in East Asia: a young man whose beauty (and sexual appeal) transcends the boundary of gender or sexual orientation.

Chapter 20

Come to think of it, Erika had an older brother- although it was too late, Harold remembered. If he had to give a reason as to why he had forgotten about him so much, it was because not only had Itsuki not appeared even in an episode not related to the main storyline, even his name wasn't made clear in the game.
But if he thought about it calmly, if Erika were the only child, with her getting married off into another family, the Sumeragi house would most likely become extinct. With such a situation, there was no way they would easily agree to an engagement, so to not realize about the existence of an older brother was Harold's blunder.

Well, that in itself wasn't a huge problem. But Itsuki being the older brother having such a heavy sister complex was completely inconceivable.
Having Itsuki, who had a dark smile on his face, laughing with a 'Fufufufu' as the opponent would be extremely bothersome.

「I've heard about it. Well then, come fight with me」

Those eyes closely resembled a ones of a carnivorous beast eyeing its prey. He was completely receiving unjustified resentment, and Harold also didn't want to take him on looking at his behavior, but still Harold convinced himself that it was for the sake of gaining precious real battle experience.

「Don't touch me acting all familiar, you small fry」

He had wanted to just normally request 「My shoulder is hurting, so could you please remove your hand?」 and he had no intention to pick a fight.
But as long as he had this mouth, he couldn't avoid falling into perilous situations. The mouth is the origin of calamity- Harold could even believe that this proverb was a wise saying written down in the Shinten[1].

「You're more than motivated, huh. Then, prepare immediately」

While inwardly drawing away from Itsuki whose smile deepened,

thinking that it would certainly be hard to move around with the current attire of a boy from Britain, in accordance to those words, he changed to the garments prepared in the changing room.
On top was a white dougi, and below was a dark blue hakama like an outfit for an archery club member[2].

Looking at Harold who came out after changing his outfit, Tasuku, Itsuki and many people sitting in the spectator seats of the 2nd floor gasped. Although the boy who was only 140 cm tall was wearing a clean, brand new dougi, no innocence could be felt from his behavior. Harold was emitting an intimidating pressure which pricked one's skin.

「Is this the weapon?」

Similar to the one Itsuki was holding, he took a shinai which was on the wall.
For the sake of grasping the sensation, when he lightly swung it, it was light enough to make him think that there was almost no weight at all. While making 'Hyunhyun' sounds of cutting the air, Harold freely swung the shinai around as he pleased.

It was a flowing sword handling which was so sharp that onlookers could only stare at wonder. Looking at that, Itsuki breathed out a light 「Hee」 in admiration.
Although he had heard about Harold beforehand, actually looking at Harold's sword skill, he renewed his awareness to not be negligent. For Itsuki, though he was a detestable opponent who stole his beloved little sister, looking at how a kid of only 10 years of age had trained to this extent, he was honestly feeling admiration.

Simultaneously the hope that if it were Harold, he might be able to enjoy the fight boiled up.
If talking about swordsmanship, Itsuki was outstanding. He might be a person in the domain of prodigies.
Therefore, even at the present time he wouldn't easily lose to a grown man in a fight, and on the other hand, there was a huge difference in power between him and the other children of his age, so much so that there was no way they could fight him.

If said that he didn't feel any discontent about that at all, then it would be a lie. Somewhere in his heart, he had always wished for a rival who was close to him in both age and strength.
And now, an opponent who might perhaps become that had appeared. If only Harold wasn't Erika's fiance, Itsuki would have even thought of welcoming him with open arms.

「It's as though it's a stick」

Harold's impressions after swinging the shinai briefly was only that. Though that way of putting it was too much, for Harold who had continued to train with an iron sword until now, he felt that the shinai's weight was lacking.

「Well then, are you ready?」

「Don't ask foolish questions. Let's start already」

Towards Tasuku who wanted to take confirmation, in an arrogant manner which felt as though it was even refreshing, Harold replied.
He was nervous. It would be fine to even call it fear. Although Itsuki was a character who didn't make an appearance in the original work, he was a human who was living in an RPG like world where swords and magic and monsters existed as though it was natural. He was inside such a world and was called strong so there was no way he would be ordinary.

When thinking normally, there was no way a person who was carefreely living in modern Japan could win. But Harold also believed in something other than this body.
Although this mouth which repeatedly used abusive language and provocative statements which gave him trouble, this high-spec body which could implement movements and ability which could never have been possible with his original body, was without a doubt a huge asset.

As he closed his eyes, in the darkness, the fight with the original Harold floated up clearly. When he had fought for the 1st time, he was made to had experienced hardships at the overwhelming speed and skill.
Currently, the body he was in had the capacity to accomplish that

eventually. And if he were to control this body of his own will, then–

(I don't feel like losing)

In both of Harold's eyes, a never before seen strong light was burning. With those eyes, he glared at Itsuki who was in front of him.
After the 2 of them became silent, Tasuku confirmed the rules.

「Weapon is the shinai. Including the head and face, attack to the vitals, and also usage of magic is prohibited. No time limit. The match will conclude when any one of you is unable to fight or gives up. With the exception of these, it's equal to real combat. Are there any problems with the rules?」

「None」

「Are you saying that this is equal to actual combat? It's considerably lax」

「Although you're dissatisfied, no matter what I want to avoid any large injuries. Unless you put armor, it has to be at least this much」

「…….Well fine. For today, those conditions will do」

Rather, he was thankful for that proposal, but on the surface he reluctantly agreed. Tasuku was inwardly relieved looking at that. The reason was because he had proper understanding of Itsuki's ability. With his swordsmanship which wasn't inferior even when compared to a soldier who had experienced actual combat, if it wasn't limited to a certain extent, the chances of him injuring Harold were high.
Even if it was something that Harold himself wished for, it wouldn't be fine to injure a noble's eldest son, that too the child of another noble who providing assistance.

Even without it being said, Itsuki understood his Father's concern. If possible, he had wanted to fight with his all, but considering both their positions, it would be difficult.

Then, let us cross swords as much as possible within the given extent was what he thought. That was why he unexpectedly said the following words.

「I'll leave the first hit to you. Give it your all」

Itsuki had no intention to look down on Harold. Since he couldn't use all his strength, he wanted to know what Harold's full strength was like.
So to speak, it was words with feelings close to apology since he couldn't help but hold back against Harold who had wanted a serious match.

「……..」

Towards Itsuki's attitude which could even be called complacent, Harold unexpectedly didn't respond. It was just to the extent of raising his right eyebrow by a little. Maybe it was because he was calm enough to accept it as worthless behavior, or maybe because of quite anger which suppressed his irritation.

In exchange to Tasuku and the others moving back to the wall, a man with wide shoulders stepped forward and stood in between Harold and Itsuki who were gazing at each other.
Confirming that the 2 of them had taken their stances, he loudly pronounced the start of the mock battle.

「Both parties, take your stance……..Start!」

Simultaneously moving with the declaration to start was Harold who was given the first hit. That in itself was roughly as expected. But the thing which was out of anybody's expectations was Harold's speed. With a speed as though he had disappeared, Harold stepped in and closed the gap between him and Itsuki in an instant.

「!?」

It wasn't only Itsuki who raised his voice in shock. Among the ones who were watching this match, people either had the same reaction as Itsuki's or no voice even came out because they were doubting their own eyes.

But even if Juno, the only person who had actually seen Harold's speed with her own eyes, were present here, even she would react like everybody else. Because, that speed and the sharpness of his movement, when compared to a month ago, he had improved exceptionally.

Since it took Itsuki completely unguarded, he couldn't respond properly. But still, it was only possible because it was Itsuki that he tried to take a defensive form out of conditioned reflex.
But that was it. As their shinai collided, a 'Shiiin' sound reverberated inside the dojo. In the middle of that echo, a 'Gasha' sound rose up as one of the shinai fell to the floor.After Harold passed by in an instant, the one who stood bare-handed and paralyzed was Itsuki.
While everyone were at a loss for words, with the shinai hanging loosely next to him, Harold spat out words while sneering at Itsuki.

「If this were a real death match, you would have already been dead. Aren't you glad, that I wasn't serious」

It even came off as a sarcastic remark. But for Itsuki, he heard it as though it was even filled with disappointment.
As though enduring his frustration, he clenched his right hand, which still had a dull numbing sensation due to having the shinai knocked away from his hand, tightly.

「…….Right, it's like you've said. I apologize for underestimating you」

The feeling of regret welling up in Itsuki's heart wasn't towards Harold. It was because he was ashamed at his own foolishness of unconsciously looking down on Harold although had no intention of being negligent.
And as he realized that Harold was disappointed in him, at the same time he was also convinced.

(Even he was searching for a rival with whom he can compete with his all, huh? Like me)

Itsuki imagined thinking what he would have done if their positions were reversed. If Harold had held back like how he had done, then

as expected Itsuki wouldn't have been able to suppress his anger. Harold might have placed that discontentment in that last strike. On the other hand, because he was angry he wasn't able to give his all.

Itsuki's kinetic vision was somehow able to perceive Harold's sword. If he hadn't seen it wrong, Harold had intentionally matched his sword's trajectory to the defensive posture Itsuki had taken and had knocked his shinai away.
The reason he hadn't hit Itsuki's hand or body like that itself was because it was an implicit complaint - 「You also Fight seriously」, was how Itsuki interpreted it.

Only a single part, that Harold had intentionally aimed for the shinai was correct. It was just that Harold, who looked 10 years old but whose mental age was close to 20, had no courage to strike Itsuki, whose age wasn't odd enough to call him a child.
Although he was resolved to get hurt, as expected he was hesitant to hurt Itsuki. This time's battle's 1st step was to overcome that kind of feeling, but it wasn't possible when the opponent was a kid.

「And this time, I want to request from my side. Please, fight with me for real」

「Are you an idiot. From the start, this contest was for the sake of doing that」

Without the least bit of hesitation, Harold stated. So quickly that Itsuki unintentionally felt let-down.
Although even Harold didn't want to do it, but since from the start he intended to survive in this world of survival of the fittest there was no need to hesitate.

「……..Ah, that's right, huh」

「If you still want to fight, hurry up and pick up your weapon. If it's just that much, I'll wait」

「Thanks. But I'll take the first move next, alright?」

Picking up the shinai from the ground, Itsuki addressed Harold in an informal manner different from up until now.

Receiving those words, even Harold's mouth curved, and in a voice as though he was somewhat enjoying it, he replied.

「Fuhn, try it. If you can keep up to my speed that is」

「I'll show it to you」

Because that was the courtesy he had to show towards Harold who wished for a serious battle.
With the match about to be restarted, the tension from before intensified much more. When Tasuku was about to cut into that mood, he received a glance from both Harold and Itsuki.

『We know』

The gazes which seemed to complain together.
We'll obey the presented conditions, and yet even with that we'll fight seriously. That's why don't stop us.
Tasuku who felt as though he was told that, after hesitating, retracted his right foot which had gone forward. Confirming that, different from up until now, Itsuki showed Harold his original gentle smile.

「Here I come!」

Those words became the signal to restart.
They started moving almost at the same time. However as expected, Harold was faster. But the one who made the first move was Itsuki as he had declared.

Harold's speed was already superior to Itsuki's. But if he knew that and concentrated, he wouldn't lose sight of Harold's figure.
And from the 1st time's face off, Itsuki formed a hypothesis that Harold's speed might not be only linear. The basis for that was because Harold himself wanted to experience combat. He judged that Harold most probably lacked combat experience itself. This meant that it was hard to think that a person who lacked experience, in other words an inexperienced person would be able to move around as they pleased with that much speed or would be able to mix in feints with their attacks.

Itsuki's conjecture hit bull's-eye. He instantly predicted where Harold's destination would be, and the slash he fired off at the empty space became a counter that attacked Harold who appeared there.

「Tsk!」

Against that strike which wouldn't be odd if it had settled the battle, Harold defended due to his superhuman reaction speed. But because of that, his feet had stopped.
This was Itsuki's aim. Without letting go of the chance to win brought forth, he showered attacks on Harold.

Even for Harold who had confidence in his speed, with the gap being close enough to trade blows, he couldn't use the rush he had shown during the start.
That said, even if he tried to take some distance, Itsuki closed the gap between them to prevent him from doing so.

If it were simply battling using sword techniques, Itsuki held the advantage.
Harold was fundamentally an amateur and on top of that when he wasn't able employ the speed used by his legs, his sword speed fell remarkably, and Itsuki wasn't troubled dealing with his attacks which became too linear.

Conversely, since Harold's eyes were too good, he reacted for each and every feint. Since he hadn't cultivated something like "reading the flow" during a battle at all, his body ended up being pulled around by his exceptional kinetic vision. When that was the case, the scales of victory gradually tilted towards Itsuki's side. Aiming to hit Itsuki's torso, when he swung his shinai, it was prevented by Itsuki blocking with his shinai, and like that itself they locked swords and started pushing at each other.
Finally, Harold's feet came to a complete standstill.

「What's wrong? You have just been defending」

「Your breathing is getting ragged and seems to painful」

「That could be said for the both of us」

Contesting strengths, Itsuki who was 10 cm taller held the advantage. Being repelled back as though he was pushed away, the instant Harold's posture crumbled a bit, Itsuki's body suddenly

sank.
Harold instinctively realized that this blow would be unavoidable. Even if he wanted to defend with the shinai, in the state where his torso was inclined backwards, he wouldn't be able to properly defend.
The most he could do was to get pursued when he became defenseless after his shinai was knocked away.

(Got you!)

Harold tried to intercept the slash aimed at his left torso with the shinai held in his right hand. It was impossible to prevent the attack which had his whole body weight behind it, defense was just some poor and vain struggle.
Itsuki sent that shinai flying– should have.

「Eh?」

Involuntarily leaking out such a voice right in the middle of a match was because, no matter how inadequate Harold's posture was, the resistance given by the flicked shinai was too small, as though he had swung at empty air. It was because he'd gotten an impression like that.
Which wasn't surprising, because the instant both their shinai collided, Harold released his shinai.

The shinai which was launched up easily revolved in midair, and because of that a blank space for a small instant was formed. A fatal gap when one's eyes and consciousness strayed away from one's opponent by a little in a battle.
As Itsuki thought "Not good", simultaneously his right shoulder was hit by an impact.

『Heavy Palm Knock』[3]
It was a technique which appeared in the story, an unarmed combat technique which dealt damage by a palm strike. Originally, it was technique which was used in combination with normal attacks, and it wasn't an attack by which an enemy could be defeated if used alone.
But for a defenseless opponent, it could at least knock them down, literally.

「Guu!」

Unable to endure the impact of the palm strike, Itsuki fell down face up.
Even with his back being struck by the ground, the next thing he saw when he immediately tried to raise his body and rearrange his stance was Harold's figure who had caught the shinai which was falling down and pointing its end at his neck.

「That's it!」

The referee's call which announced the conclusion echoed out in the dojo.
With that as the signal, the dojo regained its silence. The only thing that could be heard was Harold and Itsuki's ragged breathing.

One was looking up, while one was looking down.
In a composition which was easy to understand, while looking at Harold whose grim expression still hadn't changed, Itsuki accepted his defeat.
As expected, it was frustrating to lose. Right before the match began, him thinking that there was no way he would lose to a boy 3 years younger than himself increased his frustration.

But different to that, the feeling of fulfillment which he couldn't obtain until now was satisfied. I finally obtained the thing I've always wanted- he was experiencing a floating feeling like that.

(So this is the thing where we mutually cultivate each other, a rival, huh. Although I lost, it doesn't feel bad)

Let alone feeling bad, he was even feeling refreshed.

「Aah, I'm tired. Can you lend me a hand?」

「I don't remember knocking you down so hard that you wouldn't be able to stand. Due to sheltered upbringing, your endurance isn't enough」

Towards Harold who extended his hand even while being cynical, Itsuki smiled.

「I'll retrain from the basics. That's why let's have a rematch again」

「Fuhn, I won't lose to you again. I'll repay this debt for sure」

「What do you……」

Harold was speaking as though Itsuki had won. When he saw that Itsuki didn't understand, Harold muttered 「Idiot」 and replied with displeasure.

「To think that you were a bird brain who didn't even sufficiently grasp the rules of the match. It was stated beforehand that the "weapons are shinai". Do you think that the last attack, the palm strike, which knocked you down was an attack from the shinai?」

「……」

Listening to Harold, not only Itsuki, but all the people who were watching the match were at a loss for words. Certainly, if it was like that, then it would be Harold's loss by disqualification.
But it could be said that Harold who reacted instantly when he was cornered was splendid. At the very least, everybody present here thought so, and nobody would object that it was he who won.

Except for Harold who had won.

「Ku, haha…….」

As a result, Harold who bluntly stated that as though it was obvious, appeared to be too straightforward, stoic and more than anything pure, so Itsuki unintentionally laughed.
Due to that, Harold's displeasure grew even more.

「What's so funny?」

「No, I just thought that you are strong」

「Is that sarcasm, you bastard. I'll rip that tongue off」

「Don't say such a scary thing」

It couldn't be helped that Itsuki enjoyed even this trivial talk. Turning towards the direction from where he suddenly felt a gaze, his little sister with a reproachful expression on her face entered his sight. He didn't even need to think about what that meant.

(Well well, it seems as though we've exchanged places. Harold-kun might have the charm to draw people)

He was jealous at his little sister being taken away, but before he realized it, his sister was jealous of him. At such a ridiculous situation, Itsuki felt like laughing more and more.
As one would expect, if he were to do that, Harold seemed as though he would seriously get angry, so he somehow endured it, and in one corner of his head, he thought of something like this.

(Harold-kun is a rival and my brother-in-law, huh……Such a future might not be bad)

Author –

I thought of splitting the fight with Itsuki into 2 parts, but since I couldn't find the right place to cut it, I finished it in a single chapter.
And because of that the gap (between chapters) became a bit more, but since it was somewhat longer than usual, please give me a break.
Or rather, the description of the battle is so poor that it is terrible.

TL –
1. Shinten – Collectively, sacred texts of the Shintō religion of Japan.
2. The clothes used in Japanese archery clubs are like those.
3. Don't know what else to call it. Please comment if you have better translations. The kanji- (剛打掌)

Chapter 21

Even in his dreams Harold didn't think that the opponent who was openly baring his hostility just before the match was thinking of such things now, but still he sensed that Itsuki's mood had changed and he was puzzled at that sudden change.
Well he might just be in a good mood since he won- he came to this conclusion which was completely off the mark.

(Or rather I lost. What"I don't feel like losing at all")

And that too he lost by disqualification against a kid. It was more pitiful than losing normally.
He was thinking that perhaps this high-spec body excelled at some flag collection ability.

As though sweeping away that worst possible case which crossed his mind, he shook his head 2 to 3 times, and wishing to puck up his mood which had sunk by breathing fresh air, his feet headed outside the dojo.
Instead of going outside the entrance from which he came in, he went towards the opening which was connected to the changing room, and stood under the blue sky.

While bathing in the comfortable wind which felt good against his perspiring body, he continued barefoot on the the white stone pavement which was laid down beautifully.
From the dojo which had its entrance set up on a hill, there was an unbroken view of the Sumeragi's town.

The townscape which resembled old Japan spread out below the cliff. The buildings which were spread out were only wooden ones and there were no buildings which were high enough to cut across sky. Here and there, nature was overflowing, and as though to color them, pink petals were fluttering about.
Although it wasn't a scenery he was particularly familiar with, it was without a doubt one which directly stimulated a Japanese person's nostalgia.

Maybe that was the trigger.

The time since he came to this world was approximately 5 months. Remembering about his home world which came across his mind, his tear glands slackened and his vision became blurred.
As though that was the signal for the burst, Harold's mind was attacked by a wave of emotions in succession.

The feeling of solitude being far away from his hometown, the future that awaited him, always steeling himself to maintain the tension, and yet carrying the inexhaustible factors of unease- all of these which combined into anxiety.
Even if it was a world similar to the game he loved, there were limits for enjoyment. The mental anxiety of living as a character before he knew it, who would die if the world flowed according to history, wasn't ordinary.

Harold was inwardly writhing at the various feelings rising up and twisting around. Being unable to endure, tears finally flowed out from his eyes and left their traces along his cheek.
Honestly, he would have broken down and cried out at the unreasonable situation he was placed in.

But the reason he stopped at crying silently was because of the high pride of the original work's Harold. Or rather, the Harold who had a personality of not accepting defeat even if he died being reduced to crying showed how cornered he was currently feeling.

「…….As if I'd stand losing」

Even though he was like that, only these words came out of his mouth. Even if he wanted to whine, sticking to pride so stubbornly was actually magnificent- Harold was thinking of such things in the corner of his mind where there was some composure was present. If it weren't for this steel like mental toughness, Harold might have already broken.

While thinking of these sentimental things, he was gazing at the cherry-blossom petals fluttering about the Sumeragi's town. And before long, his heart started to gradually calm down. While thinking of returning back to the dojo soon, as he was about to turn around, he was called out.

「Harold-sama」

As soon as that voice reached his ears, his heart started palpitating. Obviously, it wasn't due to feelings of love.
It was because he didn't know what to do when nothing good could be expected at all when this person came into contact with him.

When he turned around with movements as though he were a corroded tin toy[1], the figure that was there was unmistakably Erika's.
But Harold had no idea as to what Erika was thinking to come here or why she had called him out. Because he should be completely hated by her.

Well, his perception that he was hated in itself was wrong. The reason why she purposely came looking for Harold was because her back was pushed by Itsuki saying -「It seemed like he was discouraged so how about you go and console him?」.
Honestly speaking, it didn't look like Harold was feeling dispirited to Erika. She even received the impression that the way he was talking to Itsuki seemed to be easygoing.
As a matter of fact, at how Itsuki was speaking as though he could sense Harold's true feelings, she felt exceedingly annoyed, and by the time she realized it, her feet were already heading towards Harold.

But when she thought about it carefully, this was the ideal time to apologize to him. According to Tasuku's intentions, she couldn't inform that the misunderstanding had been solved, but she should still properly apologize for slapping him.
At the time when she was about to compromise with him, Erika ended up seeing it.

His right hand had covered both his eyes while he was facing the sky, but there was a single tear which flowed through the gaps of his fingers and down his cheek.

Erika's feet stopped in panic. She instantly understood that she had seen something that she shouldn't have. The reason for crying, the emotions behind the tears, Erika couldn't understand at all. Since she didn't know Harold well enough to do that.

With the shocking scene of Harold shedding tears in front of her, a small muttering of "As if I'd stand losing" reached Erika's ears. Harold, a boy of the same age as herself, might have always kept fighting like this.

Always confident and wearing that fearless smile which was like him, he might have been crying secretly, and he might have always been contending against adults without making his true motives known.
Only being strong wouldn't be enough, and only being intelligent wouldn't make one win. If one didn't have an indomitable spirit to push aside adversities, they wouldn't be able to behave like him.

Erika keenly realized at this time that what her father had said was true.
And she finally realized that she was misunderstanding a thing. She had thought that Harold was a person who wouldn't crumble no matter what the predicament was and would be able to easily overcome them, and that his confidence came out as his usual haughtiness.

However there was no way Harold would have only strength. Harold too was a child of the same age as her. Naturally, he would also have his weak parts.
It was just that he was pretending to have that haughty attitude so thoroughly that his surroundings wouldn't realize about such an obvious thing. Since there was no person to whom he could show his weak appearance, he couldn't help but behave like that.

Realizing Harold's circumstance, the only thought that came to Erika's mind was that she didn't want to leave him, who was trying to be alone by his own choice, alone.

(……..This might be what Father was talking about, about how I should "Become a person who can truly understand Harold")

If that was the case, it became clear as to what she had to do. She wouldn't hesitate anymore.
Even if she didn't have the qualifications right now, even if there were many things she still didn't have, she would surely become a person who could someday support that scarred back. Today was the first day she etched that resolution onto herself. As soon as she decide that, she felt as though her heart became unburdened.

That was why she was able to call his name without getting worked up. After he was called, Harold slowly turned around. His eyes were

filled with suspicion.
Certainly, when she thought about his mental state, she could understand why he was making such eyes. But Erika had already sworn that she wouldn't falter at that attitude anymore.

「The match just now was wonderful. Even with me, who is ignorant about swordsmanship, I could understand that Harold-sama is strong」

「You siblings, have you come to rub salt on the wound?」

「Not at all. Isn't it something like you lost in the battle but won in the war」

「I see, you came to pick a fight, huh?」

Harold had lost that match by disqualification. If conforming to that saying, then it would be that he lost in the battle and also in the war.
It could only be thought of as purposely taunting him, saying that with a dazzling smile.

「Pff…….I'm extremely sorry. I said too much」

It seemed as though Erika also was aware of it.
But more than that, for Harold it baffling at how naturally Erika was talking to him. On top of that, in this exchange too, she wasn't feminine.

「Hmph, if you want to say some worthless nonsense, then play around with your servant or something」

「Please wait」

Erika blocked Harold's path when he wanted to leave this place as fast as possible.
The agitation at not being able to read Erika's aim turned into irritation and his mouth became even more severe.

「Move, I don't have any time for you. Even if there were, I'd crush them all」

「However, in that case I won't be able to talk properly with Harold-sama」

「Right, which is convenient」

「Unfortunately, I can't let that happen. At least only for now, please spare me some of your time」

Erika's appearance from which only gracefulness like a flower could be felt until now, for some reason he felt her to be unshakeable like a big tree with deep roots in the ground. In short, it didn't feel as though she would move even an inch.
So this is the pressure from a character of the game, huh- Harold losing to that clicked his tongue, and with his sullen aura in full throttle, he spoke to her.

「…….If you have any business, quickly finish it」

「Thank you very much」

Saying that, Erika bent her waist and took a posture of bowing deeply.

「I'm really sorry for the other day. Even though I was angry, it was wrong for me to hurl insults and also raise my hand. I'd like to apologize」

「Ha, you expressly came here say something like that? Pointless」

Though his words were cold, it wasn't a lie that they were his true feelings. Harold had intentionally angered Erika, and that reaction was appropriate. Normally, one wouldn't think to apologize for it. It was because she was Erika that she had come like this to apologize.

It wasn't a mistake that that kindness was her virtue. She was considered likeable by a majority of the people. Truthfully, it was the same with Harold when he was a player.
But for the Harold now, he could only think of that excessive kindness as fangs with deadly poison. It was a deadly existence where once bit by them, it might become fatal.
She was flourishing a very selfish kindness. When he was thinking like that, his mouth opened.

「There is no value in your apology. Rather, even though you cried so assertively, apologizing right after you said that, are you a real idiot? In the first place, that kindness of yours is a deception which comes from good will. On top of being nasty, it's nothing more than nauseatingly lukewarm feeling of being friendly. And it is up to you to dance around like a clown like that, but don't get in my way. Don't get in my sight. You're an eyesore and like the extremity of unpleasantness」

In addition to the foulmouthed nature of the original Harold, the resentment against Erika that had accumulated erupted out in one go. After throwing all that abuse, he regained his composure. He completely said too much. Furthermore, he was venting out his anger on her.
For a reason differing from before, he wanted to cry.

Showered with abusive words while being in the posture of apologizing, there was not even the slightest movement from Erika. Did I make her cry, or else did I make her angry- while he was observing timidly, Erika quietly raised her body.

Neither was she expressing anger nor was she tearful. That said, she also wasn't dispirited at being overwhelmed by those words.
What was there was a calm expression like a holy maiden's in a painting as though she had accepted all of Harold's abusive words.

Erika had already resolved herself in advance knowing that Harold would show an attitude like this regarding her apology. Because she knew that he was a person who was strong and severe, and also was a person who possessed true kindness, different from her. There were no lies mixed in those abusive words towards Erika. She was aware without even there being a need to be told that she was an existence that was a minus for Harold.

(The things that I don't have are too much. The strength to fight against a difficult fate, and the kindness to scold the weak)

From the start she had been mistaken. Lending a hand wasn't the only type of kindness. Watching over, thrusting away, doing nothing was also a type of kindness. For the sake of that person, so that they would grow.

But to actually put that into practice, the strength to believe in the other party was necessary. The person who would be able to support Harold would also be a person like that.

That's why no matter how severe she would accept Harold's words which pointed out at her inexperience, and only by using this as the source to grow would she become an existence who would be able to truly understand and support him. This was just the first step.

「……Hmph」

Harold left the place as though he had lost his interest.
Erika spoke towards that small back which had disappeared into the dojo.

「I won't say "Please wait for me". But I'll catch up to you for sure. There's absolutely no way that I'd leave you alone」

Erika's muttering was carried by the wind together with the cherry-blossom petals and went away towards the blue sky.

TL –
1. Buriki Ningyou – Japanese vintage tin toy produced in large numbers after World War 2.

Felt like I was in some cringe-fest while translating the latter half

Chapter 22

「Say old man, how much more time until we reach?」

While being rocked by the carriage used by the general public which was being pulled by 2 horses, a young boy with his eyes sparkling asked his father who was sitting next to him. That fidgety and nervous behavior looked as though he couldn't wait to reach his destination.
Towards that, the boy's father as though wanting to hold back his impatient son, replied.

「Very soon, so be quiet」

「That's all you've from some time ago! I'm tired of hearing 'Very soon'」

「But I'm tired of hearing Liner's "how much more time?"」

On the opposite side of the boy's father, inevitably sitting in the fetal position with a cramped posture, a blonde haired girl spoke to the red haired boy as though she was exasperated.
It took the form of the boy, Liner, being remonstrated by the 2 of them. But there was a reason for him to act like this.

「It's the first time we're going to a city, right? Aren't you excited?」

Being brought up in a countryside village called Brosch, which was surrounded by mountains, if it were to be called as going afar, Liner had only gone to villages and towns in the vicinity. But this time was different. He had come out of the territory for the first time since being born.

「Even if you call it a city, it's just Delfit. It's not like we're going to the capital and if you are so excited it'll be completely obvious that you're a bumpkin」

「Well, Brosch is rural」

「That wasn't what I meant……」

It was a lively conversation, but there was nobody paying attention to it. From the start, the carriage was crowded with people and all of them were chatting as they pleased so the people who paid any attention to this conversation were non-existent.
But among them, there was a man who seemed to be in the prime of his life, having a good physique and an abundant beard, saw that conversation and started talking to Liner's father.

「Do you people come from Brosch?」

「Yes. Do you know Brosch?」

「It's the village which is at the edge of the territory governed by Viscount Ballack, right?」

「You seem to be well informed」

「Since I'm somewhat friendly with him」

Saying that, the man tipped his empty hand towards himself in front of his mouth. Liner's father understood what he wanted to say by looking at that action.

「It's related to alcohol, huh」

「Right! If you talk about 『Bale's brewery』, it is well known locally in its own way」

'Gahahaha'- The man laughed in a hearty manner which fit his appearance.

Viscount Ballack was famous for being a matchless alcohol lover. If the people living in the territory were asked about it, they would have heard at least once about the rumors that he would drink alcohol every night as though he were bathing in it or that he would often visit the bars in the town for a drink.
According to Bale, the Viscount was living in the town where Bale was running the brewery, before he started governing. It seemed that he had liked the alcohol from Bale's brewery from that time itself, and even after he became the Viscount, he had been buying from the brewery regularly.

But although the monetary transaction was appropriate, it was hard to say that his town was close to the Ballack territory. And so, he was now in the middle of expanding his business in the Ballack territory after the sale.
He said that although he still hadn't gone to Brosch, he knew its name and the geography around it.

「But still, if its from Brosch, you are coming pretty far. Is Delfit your destination? It isn't very suitable for bringing children to sight-see」

Port city Delfit. As its name indicated, it was a town which spread out facing the ocean, and where fishing and trade were prosperous. A majority of the part in contact with the sea was the port, so the traffic of ships was quite large and it wasn't as though there was a beach for enjoying in the sea. It would be a different matter if one went towards the coastline a small distance away from the port where there were no ship lanes, but in that area monsters were usually present. There were passenger boats which went around the sea, but looking at Liner and the 2 of them, they didn't appear to be prepared for enjoying the boat trip which would take longer than 3 months. In that case, they might have come to savor the marine products.

「It's not for sightseeing but for participating in the fighting tournament!」

Towards Bale's question, Liner decisively declared so.
Delfit was a port city — in other words, it was a town of fishermen. Therefore, there were a lot of men who were vigorous and proud of their strength.

Maybe with that spirit as the origin, from olden days a fighting tournament was held every year in Delfit.
Although it was held with a front that it would help in maintaining the security of maritime activities, its origin was due to people who wanted to give vent to the anger piled up normally or simply those who wanted to go wild, gathering and holding it, but the compatibility of this violent event with the people living in Delfit was extraordinarily good.

As the years went by, the number of participants increased and even the scale expanded rapidly. By the time 20 years had passed from its start, even an exclusive stage was prepared and now not only from Delfit, but also from the surrounding cities, participants appeared and it had become a specialty.
Come to think of it, it was already that season, huh- while being convinced, Bale closely stared at the enthusiastic Liner and spoke.

「Fighting tournament, huh. You?」

「Wh, what? That reaction」

「It isn't that you are weak but it's just that Delfit's fighting tournament is quite serious. Just be careful to not get a big injury」

「It's fine. Since I'll win!」

「Hou, that is some grand declaration」

「Well, he is participating in the under-13 division though」

Liner's father rubbed his head roughly. To that, Liner raised a voice of protest saying 「Stop it-!」 and tried to brush away his hand.
Looking at that heart-warming scene, Bale couldn't feel the air of a strong person, one that would be able to win through the tournament, from him.
And while Liner was making a racket, suddenly the edge of his shirt was pulled and he turned his eyes towards the other side.

「What?」

「It's in sight, Delfit」

「Eh, really!?」

No sooner had it been said than Liner put not only his head, but half of his body outside the window and caught the city of Delfit in his vision.
It would be an exaggeration to say that they might reach the sky, but still he could see many tall buildings which weren't there in Lietze. There were many stalls along the highway they were moving on, and many of them were bustling with people who were going

back and forth from the city.

Even though they had yet to enter the city, that too with it being in quite the distance, it was this lively. Liner's heart was dancing at the thought of how many unknown and unheard of things would be overflowing there when he stepped inside the city. Next to him, although the girl had an uninterested expression, maybe due to being interested she was repeatedly glancing outside the window.

「Oo, incredible-!」

「Liner, don't make so much noise! And it's dangerous so draw back!」

「It's fine! Wow, what's that?」

After arriving at the long-awaited city of Delfit, Liner's tension kept increasing. Eventually, Liner's excitement continued increasing until they entered inside and got off the carriage.
And when he stood on top of Delfit's ground on his own feet, that voltage reached its peak.

「The number of people are large! The buildings are huge! There's a steel ship!」

「That's a statue of a ship!」

For the time being, Liner was shouting out whatever he saw . Even looking at the monument of a huge ship in the middle of a fountain at the central plaza, he couldn't hide his excitement.
Looking at him, the people in the town were laughing at him as though watching something pleasant. Liner was in such high spirits that he didn't even notice the surrounding situation, but for the 2 people with him, it was considerably embarrassing.

「Hey Liner, you're too excited! We have to quickly go register for the participation」

「That and all is for later! I'll go towards the sea and come back!」

「Aah……come on!」

As soon as Liner, who wasn't able to keep still, was stopped he left those words behind and started running.
That figure soon mixed within the crowd of people and disappeared.

「Good grief, he's as excited as always…… I'll complete the registration so I'll leave him to you. After you catch him, we'll assemble in front of this fountain」

「Okay, understood」

They had to inevitably split in 2 directions.
The boy called Liner, once freed, would play and move around forever until he became tired. He had gone towards the harbor to look at the sea for now, but it wasn't known where he would head to next. It was obvious that things would get problematic if she didn't chase after him immediately.

While sighing, she jogged after him, moving as though weaving through the crowd. It was a feat she could do only because she was a child who had a small build and was nimble and agile.
Although, it was a first for her, who was from the same village as Liner, also to see such a sea of people. And then, she collided with a figure coming from around the street corner.

「Kyaa!」

Due to the impact of colliding, she involuntarily fell on her backside. Since the other person had been walking, luckily she didn't seem to be injured. But that was only regarding herself. Wanting to confirm the safety of the other person, she got up.

「S, sorry! Are you alright?」

「Yes, I'm fine」

That refreshing voice reached the girl's ears without being drowned out by the bustling crowd.
That itself was something that could fascinate people, but after she saw that the owner of that voice was a girl whose age wasn't much different that hers, she caught her breath.

(C, cute……!)

There was no sarcasm, and moreover it was her frank impression. Until a position a bit below the shoulders, glossy black hair was gathered. White transparent skin like porcelain. Pupils with the same color as the hair, which held some oriental charm.
Contrary to the immaturity, the appearance of the girl who had a grown up atmosphere was so beautiful that one wouldn't doubt it if she was described using the word 『Bishoujo*』.

「Are you yourself fine? You seem to be somewhat in a daze…… 」

「Eh?……..Ah, Sorry! It's nothing! Umm, are you really not injured anywhere? 」

What should I do if there are some scratches on such a beautiful girl? – This black-haired girl was beautiful enough to make her harbor such thoughts which were close to being fearful for her.

「Don't be so worried. She instantly held me so I didn't even fall 」

「She? 」

Because her eyes were stolen by the black-haired girl she hadn't realized, but behind the girl there was woman in the former half of her twenties with chestnut colored hair, wearing a cooking outfit. Must be her attendant. When she looked closely, she noticed that the black-haired girl was wearing a splendid dress which she hadn't seen before now. Without a doubt, she was a noble.

「Come to think of it, weren't you in a hurry? 」

「Ah, that's right. But……. 」

She wanted to chase after Liner. But it would feel awkward if she didn't apologize properly.
Maybe due to sensing that conflict, a kind smile, one which made those who looked at it be at ease, floated up on the black-haired girl's face.

「Don't mind me. Rather, this means that the both of us were fated to meet 」

「Fated to meet……..」

「If this is a strong bond, we'll be able to meet again someday. That's why, when we reunite again…….let's see, please become my friend」

「F, friend?」

Listening to the completely unexpected request, her eyes became like saucers.

「You don't want to?」

「N, n, not at all! Rather, is it fine with someone like me…….」

「If we are to meet again, it'll be proof that our bond is real, so isn't it natural that we become friends?」

「Is that……..so?」

「Yes. And so, could you hold your current feelings until our reunion?」

「Y, yes!」

Honestly, she couldn't understand the girl's point, but for some reason she was able to readily accept it.
Maybe it was due to the girl's charm.

「Well then, let's meet again somewhere. Let's go, Juno」

「Yes ~」

Within the city where people kept moving without any break, the black-haired girl and her attendant-like woman left with calm footsteps.
After that, she came back to her senses and secured Liner, and by the time she came back to the fountain while dragging him, the sun had started to sink.

Normally, she would have been scolding Liner for causing trouble, but only today, due to meeting that mysterious girl her feelings

somewhat hazy.
She couldn't properly put it in words, but it was as though the gears of destiny had started to turn, that kind of feeling which could be called as neither anxiety nor upliftment.

While she was still having that kind of somewhat murky feeling, the next morning came. Since it was the day of the fighting tournament, Liner, who was 3 times more energetic than his usually excessively energetic self, went ahead to the venue, and she had a shocking encounter which couldn't be compared to yesterday's.

No, accurately speaking, that wasn't an encounter but a "reunion".

It was when the participants for the under-13 fight, including Liner, were gathered at the room next to the stage, when they were waiting for their names to be called out.
When she was waiting for the tournament to start and Liner to make an appearance, she saw a figure which made her doubt her own eyes.

That figure, which she couldn't have forgotten from that day 3 years ago, was called by a name different from the one in her memories.
There was no way she would mistake the appearance of the person who had saved her life. He was taller and the masculinity of his features had increased, but the vestiges of that day were still markedly left.

By chance, his eyes perceived the girl. Those deep crimson pupils which expressed a strong will were the same as those on that day. Their eyes met, and she caught her breath. Their gazes intersected only for a single instant. As he moved his gaze, she breathed out as though she had just remembered about the air accumulated in her lungs. Together with that, the blonde-haired girl– Colette Amerel spoke out the name of the boy, who had carried out the reunion, as though she were chewing on it.

「…….Harold, sama」

TL –

I left it as Bishoujo since any other translation wouldn't do justice. Sorry for the amount of pronouns. The author didn't use their names at all.
Delfit is [デルフィト] – Derufito. Liner is [ライナ] – Raina. Colette's last name is [アメレール]- Amereru. I previously translated it as Emerel. Any suggestions are welcome.

End of Volume 1.

Credits

My Death Flags Show No Sign of Ending

Author: Izumi.

Illustrator: Achiki.

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Ebook: dreamer2908.

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